

Fifth Sunday of Easter 2021

2 May 2021

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St. Thomas Episcopal Church

Greenville, AL 36037

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Readings Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Many of us are familiar with the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his teachings against the church embracing a theology of “cheap grace.”

As I reflected on our readings, Bonhoeffer’s writings about cheap grace came to my mind, and I want to take a moment and share a short excerpt from his writings to contrast what the world calls grace and God’s grace, because similar to this difference between ‘cheap grace’ and the costly grace of discipleship, so also is there a difference between what the world labels ‘love’ and the sacrificial, self-surrendering love that discipleship demands of those who follow Jesus.

Bonhoeffer wrote:

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.

Above all, it is costly because it costs God the life of His Son, and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon His Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered Him up for us.

Costly grace is the Incarnation of God. Costly grace is the sanctuary of God.”

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer (February 4, 1906-April 9, 1945)

I thought of Bonhoeffer’s writings because ‘love,’ like ‘grace,’ can also be cheapened, but Godly love is costly.

In our epistle reading today, we hear John encouraging believers to love one another. John wrote, “Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is

no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

Jesus modeled perfect love that casts out fear from the first days of his earthly ministry. He also called his Apostles to this difficult work of loving others as God loves through the community of followers he brought together.

Jesus did not waste time on practices of ‘cheap love’ that allowed people to remain in self-defeating cycles of shame and guilt and unending repetitions of worldly penance. Jesus called people to acknowledge their sin, repent and commit to life change with God’s help.

Jesus invited people to enter into this godly love that demanded life change over and over again: at the beginning of John 5 we read about the man lying by the pool of Bethzatha. This man did not call out to Jesus, rather Jesus approached him, asking, “Do you want to be made well?” John 5:14 says Jesus found this man later in the temple and said, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.”

Jesus had extended an invitation to godly love to this man. Jesus did not shame him or punish him or deride him. Jesus said do you want to be made well and are you willing to commit to a changed life?

We see another example of godly love leading to life change in Jesus calling Matthew as a disciple, and in this example, we also see Jesus forming the other Apostles in their understanding of what it means to love one another with the love of God.

Jesus extended an invitation to Matthew to join him and become his follower, but this call was not unconditional. Jesus didn’t subject Matthew to condemnation over his life choice as a tax collector, but he didn’t skip over the realities of Matthew’s choice either. Jesus called Matthew to repent and leave his old life behind him and embrace a new life of discipleship.

Like costly grace – godly love doesn’t avoid acknowledging the truth of sin – but it doesn’t linger there for the sake of inflicting fear and punishment.

Godly love invites people to repentance and life change. We can be sure that as Matthew joined the group of Jesus’ closest followers there was some anger and resentment felt by those he had exploited while serving as a tax collector for Rome.

Though we don’t have record of it in the gospels, I can easily imagine Jesus telling Peter, James and John, who had been commercial fisherman paying taxes to Rome, that just as they were now with Jesus, living changed lives because of Jesus invitation, so Matthew was a changed man that they had to learn to love, not because of their feelings, but because of their commitment to following Jesus.

The Apostles witnessed Jesus extending a similar invitation of godly love to many people they would have thought to be just as undeserving of this gift as

Matthew was: the Samaritan woman at the well, Zacchaeus, the Gerasene demoniac – these are only a few examples of the many people whose lives were changed because of Jesus' practice of godly love.

There were just as many people, if not more, who rejected Jesus' invitation because of the cost. The obvious examples are the religious rulers, but there was also the rich young man in Matthew 19, and in John 6, when Jesus spoke the truth in love to the crowd that followed only because they wanted more bread, but did not care about having a deeper relationship with God that the crowd left Jesus. This was the moment when Jesus asked the twelve if they would also leave him.

Jesus never said godly love seeks no offence. Godly love tells the truth with Godly grace and compassion and with the power of the Holy Spirit to enable life change.

When John wrote, "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

John had learned from Jesus that it is the world, not God, that attaches fear to love. God lays out the plan of the love He intends to share with all humanity in simple terms – perfect love casts out fear because it comes down to a matter of admission, submission and obedience. We are called to admit our need for God, submit our will to God's and then to live in obedience to God's will.

The community of Apostles lived together, each witnessing Jesus shaping and pruning their spirit and character, both individually and as members of a corporate body serving God.

Peter stayed with Jesus through the pain and discomfort of being shaped by costly love, love that pruned his impulsive nature and taught him patience, love that pruned his pride, replacing it with reverent humility. Peter likewise witnessed Jesus' work in the lives of others – Jesus had nicknamed John and his brother James the "Sons of Thunder" for a reason. No doubt when John wrote, "those who love God must love their brothers and sisters" he was remembering all Jesus had taught him about costly, self-sacrificing love.

Making the connection between these writings and our own lives is not difficult. Serving God is simple, but it is not easy. God calls us to costly love – love that bears the weight of being pruned as we are shaped and formed by His holy hand of love. God calls us to love Him with all our heart and with all our mind and to love others to the same measure that we love our own lives. Amen.