

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

*As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way; through great endurance, in afflictions, hardship, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see, we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

Dear congregation!

To be a Christian means to live in paradox. That is what we hear from the words in this text. The message is not comfortable. It reaches us with all the earnest of Lent. To live in paradox is not easy. The watchword of the 16th German evangelical church day in Frankfurt in 1975 was taken out of our sermon text of today: As dying, and see, we are alive. The poster of this church day showed the hand of the crucified Christ that is pierced right through and out of that pierced hand grows a rose, a sign of blooming new life. A paradox indeed! It shows that the experiences of God's power do not override the difficult and painful realities of our lives. We are called to follow Christ, the crucified. The risen and glorified Christ is also the crucified and suffering Christ. This is the anti-enthusiastic statement of this text which makes it clear to us that, although we are a new creation in

Christ, we are also not yet taken out of this world and still very much a part of it. Although we have received the message of grace we still cling to other means of getting ourselves right with God. We still protect our image, we still base our worth on what we have done. We do not base it on Christ or the goodness of his news. We treat Christ's sacrifice as if it were in vain (6:1). In the church, the status of the pastor and the size of her church and her involvement in synod committees or books written are more important than the goodness of the news. We do not trust what Christ offers. It's not enough. We must make it better with what we do. And when it comes to death and dying, we say that it is natural and a part of life. We say that our soul freely gets heaven without God's permission. We will say that we have been good enough so that we are guaranteed heaven, leaving unresolved the cause of our dying, our lack of faith. Christ is not needed. We have better ways to get to God.

Fortunately, God found a way to get to us! God made Jesus, who knew no sin, to be our sin (5:21). God did this so that in Christ we would be the righteousness of God (the righteousness of God being what God does to make us right with God). However, that declares our other ways of trying to be right before God a bunch of lies. We kill Christ on the cross for calling us a liar. But God raised Christ from the dead! Here is the event that cannot be overcome or hidden by our lies. God has made Jesus to be God's very rightness and goodness! God has made Jesus the only way for us to have victory over death. God has raised Jesus to be the way to heaven.

Even better, God puts us into Jesus so that we have what Jesus got—resurrection life and God's goodness and God's heaven. We are put into Jesus by God's Word spoken to us in forgiveness, in baptism, in the Lord's Supper. God speaks God's Word of salvation now in Christ (6:2). In Christ we are reconciled with God (5:20)! Christ is thus given to us as God's way of salvation, a more winsome way and more sure way than the ways we pretended were true.

Paul sees his life as a Christian and servant in Christ's church in communion with both the death and the life of Christ. In our baptism we are in fact baptized into this reality; we are baptized into the death and into the life of Christ. Already we are baptized into a paradox! That is what our baptism means. Daily we live and die in Christ. And this reality manifests itself in various ways in our daily Christian lives. We will indeed have to die -- not only our final death but also the daily dying to sin that fleshes out our baptism into Christ -- and yet in Christ we live. We may even be disciplined through what is taking place in our lives, yet in Christ we are not destroyed. Baptism seals us with the Holy Spirit and marks us as Christ's own forever. No matter how far we roam, like the prodigal son, this holy seal can never be taken from us, even if we think we have lost it. Our fundamental identity is that we belong to God in Christ, and that trumps all other aspects of our identity. We may return to this identity after each mistake and cling to it when we are challenged. When we know this, we are indeed as those who may have nothing but in what truly matters we possess everything we need for life and even for death.

As having nothing and yet possessing everything, is a further elaboration of Paul's basic point of our Christian vocation: our joy is not dependent on our circumstances. Happiness is counterintuitive. In other words, it does not lie where we instinctively look for it: in a fine reputation, a successful career, comfortable living that comes along with success, fame or being honoured for our accomplishments. Rather, we possess everything even amid sorrow and suffering, because we are emotionally dependent not on these goods, but rather on the wisdom and beauty of the compelling love of Christ. Because, after all, it is not only this life that matters!

The message of the cross -- that love captures minds and hearts better than power and might does, and that Christ's love revealed by his death, rather than by threat of punishment -- this brings us to know the heart of God and to see one another in a different, more loving

way. And so, we as Christians are -- willy nilly -- ambassadors of this powerful message; God makes his appeal to the world through us. And the right time for it is always now! Christ's death and resurrection, is "the day of salvation" (6:2); he is the "eternal now," the "acceptable time" where new life as reconciled life with God begins.

The imperative, not to receive God's grace in vain, may not overshadow that in all things we do it is this very grace of God that works in and through us. In everything that we do and experience in life and in death, it is God who is at work. That is the backdrop to everything that is said here by Paul in this text. The ability to respond to the call of Christ does not lie with us but is wholly the work of God. It cannot be forced on anyone, nor can we force it on ourselves in order to please others. Being established in Christ is a divine gift. We are but beggars who tell other beggars where to find bread. When we receive the grace of God and then think that by it we become more powerful or more capable people of God, than we indeed receive God's grace in vain. Because grace that makes us greater for God and people is no grace at all. Paul does speak about the power of God in his life and ministry, but it does not exclude his illness and weakness. Indeed, God's power is made perfect in weakness; we are as dying, and see, yet we live! And so, all our experiences in life, experiences of suffering and of pain, as well as experiences of healing and of new life all come together as a culmination of God's grace active in our lives. When Paul is in prison, his God is just as powerfully present and at work for him as God is when Paul is free and in good standing. God seizes every moment to be our saviour, and Paul urges the Corinthians to welcome this grace. In Christ, God's righteousness is flowing to us whether we need help or whether we are in a position to give help.

In everything, it is the love of Christ that controls us. This is true of all Christian vocation. This phrase is the key to the great secret that Christians discovered and that the Roman world had no access to: it is love, not military occupation, that compels allegiance. The use of force or the threat of punishment seeks to break the spirit, while love nourishes it. We often forget this crucial point in our daily walk with Christ. Parents know that sometimes tough love is necessary. Yet, our responsibility as Christ's ambassadors is to show the world around us that it is love that transforms, not might and force.

Perhaps this is not the easiest thing to hear. But actually, it is the best thing you'll ever hear! The demand, the pressure to have a good life, to be a good person, to accomplish noteworthy activities, is now gone. We are free from having to make something of our lives. Our lives have been made in Jesus. No longer do we have to judge others, condemn them, belittle them, abandon them because we disagree with them. No longer do we have to make remarks about the differences in people, such as the colour of their skin, the length of their hair, their culture, or what country they come from. We are free to help others have enough to eat. We are free to help others get the medicine they need. We are free to encourage others, to let others go first, to let others get the praise. God who sees all things knows what's in our hearts, and our hearts have Christ crucified. So, dress me with ashes and I will be clothed with glory. Smear a cross on my forehead and I will be clean. Trouble me with judgment and I will have Christ's peace through his forgiveness. Rather, trouble me with your wrongs and I will give you Christ's forgiveness.

We are free to say we are not good enough, as we do in the Ash Wednesday Confession. We no longer have to lie to protect ourselves but get to say that Christ is our rightness with God. We confess that Christ gets us God's righteousness and not our love for our neighbour. We have Christ's goodness, so we do not need our pride and hypocrisy, not our

self-indulgent ways, not our envy or intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts. We have Christ's goodness, freeing us from God's enmity and from a troubled conscience, and freeing us to give that goodness to those around us.

We have empty hands and yet, with the Word of Life we have everything that is necessary for life and for death. The epistle and gospel readings of today point us to Jesus, who, in every respect has been tested as we are, who has suffered in such a way that he is able to suffer with us. And that is why, when the paradoxes of our Christian life threaten to tear us apart, we can always approach the throne of mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

And may this mercy and grace of God, which surpasses all our human knowledge and understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.