Grace is Amazing… and Amazingly Hard to Accept

Romans 5:1-11
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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The first Sunday of September feels like one of a handful of "firsts" throughout the year.

There's the first Sunday of a calendar year in January, there's the first Sunday of Advent in late November or early December, which marks the beginning of the Christian year.

But the first Sunday of September tends to feel like a kind of re-entry into the regular rhythms and routines of life. Summer is over, the kids are back to school, and life is kind of kicking back into gear.

In the Christian Calendar, we are smack dab in the middle of what's called "Ordinary Time," the season between Pentecost (way back in June) and Advent (Nov 30 this year).

So, what to preach on during Ordinary Time? What to preach on as a new school year kicks off and as we head into fall?

This year, I've decided to do something a bit different. Instead of allowing the lectionary texts to guide my preaching each week, which is kind of my default, I have decided to organize the sermons this fall according to the themes of a book that I read on my sabbatical.

The book is called *the Big Relief* and is written by David Zahl, who is an Episcopalian priest, university chaplain, podcaster, and writer.

The book was released in April, just before my sabbatical began. I had read a few of his previous books and appreciated them (I have quoted them in sermons), I listen to his

podcast regularly and find it to be interesting. So I picked up his book, and added it to my sabbatical reading list.

The subtitle grabbed me. *The urgency of grace for a worn-out world*.

It will not surprise you to hear me say that I, too, think that grace is urgent and that our worn-out world is in desperate need of it. That *we*—you and I—are in desperate need of it.

According to David Zahl, we are all chasing relief in some form or another. Here's what he says in the introduction:

> Relief from what, exactly? It varies. It could be the… pressure to succeed or to produce or to be a certain kind of person that our culture esteems, someone with influence and initiative and purpose.
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> It could be something more mundane that we crave relief from, like the burden of a mortgage payment or the grip of chronic illness. It could something larger scale, some form sociopolitical turmoil that just won't go away. It could be the discouraging and sometimes alarming headlines that greet us every time we look at our phones.
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> Or it could be something less circumstantial and more existential, like the pressure to justify our lives and demonstrate that we're worthy of the air we breathe. Perhaps it's an internal voice of accusation and not-good-enoughness or the external judgements of others, their biases and prejudices and criticisms. Maybe we long for relief from grief or guilt or the pain of rejection. Some of us… struggle with the pressure to belong, the pressure to keep up, the pressure to say the right thing—the pressure, even, to be our own god, in control of everything.
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> It could be anything, really. The shape of the pressure fluctuates. Its presence does not.
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> The experience of being a person is, in many ways, the experience of craving and seeking relief.[1]

[1] David Zahl, *The Big Relief: The Urgency of Grace for a Worn-Out World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025), 2-3.

I am going to go out on a limb and guess that all of us identified with at least *some* of what Zahl says here.

This is what the experience of being a person is like. It's not *all* it's like (thank God). But all of us, I think, find ourselves at times seeking relief.

This is why I decided to use this book as a kind of launching pad for the next stretch of sermons. I believe, deep in my bones, that that the gospel *is good news* for those are well—acquainted with the challenges of being a person.

It's not that the book itself is earth-shattering or breaks utterly new ground or is brilliant in every way. It's not. It doesn't offer some kind of airtight formula for a life free from pain or worry or regret or confusion.

It simply holds the gospel up before us as a bright light shining in the midst of all these realities. It reminds us of truths that we all too easily forget. At least it did for me.

And I hope using its themes for our fall sermons may do the same for you.

This fall, we're going to talk about regret and rejection, guilt and our need for control, guilt, status-anxiety, and other things besides. And we're going to see, each week, how the gospel relieves us of these burdens and frees us to live lives of gratitude and joy.

This sermon series will not be:

1. An extended book review.
2. Me copying and pasting from a book to avoid writing my own sermons. I will quote David Zahl occasionally, obviously (I already have), but I'll be doing my own thing.

As we discussed this at worship committee, we agreed that we would treat this book like we treat the worship resources we often use—as a kind of departure point, or a scaffolding which provides some thematic structure but doesn't feel like a straitjacket.

So, that's the plan for fall.

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The theme for week one is the theme of chapter one of the book Grace: The Relief from Deserving.

As a way into this theme, I want to talk about two very different people. A young man in the jail and a superstar athlete.

Let's start at the jail. One of my tasks as a chaplain is to mail away correspondence bible courses for grading on behalf of inmates.

Sometimes, I read a few of their answers before stuffing them in the envelope. On my first Monday back after my sabbatical, I came across the following response to a question:

> I know that I have failed a lot in my life. And I sometimes have a hard time believing in God or understanding the bible. I want to be a better person and to do better in my life. **I guess I just have to try harder.**

A few days later, my wife sent me podcast link where some wellness guru was interviewing tennis legend Novak Djokovic.

Djokovic is probably the greatest tennis player of all time. He has won everything there is to win. He is still competing at the very highest level of a very physically demanding sport at the age of thirty-eight, regularly defeating players 10-15 years younger than him. Last week, he made it to the semifinals of the US Open.

But in the podcast, I was surprised to hear him say he struggles with feeling like he is "not enough."

He traces this to growing up in war-torn Serbia, to a demanding father, to material poverty and to feeling even as a ten-year-old that he was responsible to save and protect his family.

And even now, as one of the most recognizable athletes on the planet, with staggering wealth and success, the feeling never entirely goes away.

After a recent loss, he expressed frustration. *I work harder than anyone else. What more can I do?* He can never seem to win enough or earn enough or *be* enough to entirely silence that inner voice.

He did just start reading a book on "surrender," he said. I hope it's a good one! But like the inmate in the jail, Djokovic's response to that nagging sense of not being enough is, "I guess I have to try harder."

Now, I am not against effort. I'm not against doing what we can to be the best versions of ourselves. God knows our world could use more people who are motivated, passionate, and who feel a responsibility to use their gifts well rather than zoning out in front of their devices.

But ultimately—whether you're sitting behind prison bars or competing at the US Open—everyone must accept that "enoughness" is not something that we have to produce or maintain or justify.

We must all come to terms with the gift of a grace that goes beyond what we can earn or ever deserve.

This is a hard thing to do. I know this very well. Naomi sometimes teases me that my self-worth yo-yos up and down based on how I performed that day on the tennis or pickle ball court after work.

I even struggled not to think of my sabbatical through the lens of earning and deserving. At times—during and after—I felt the impulse to earn it or pay it back with some impressive insights or some better version of myself, to prove that I—what?—*deserved* it.

I think we very naturally try to justify ourselves through earning and deserving in all kinds of ways.

It could be sports. It could be fitness or body image. It could be performance at work. It could be academics, degrees accumulated, expertise achieved.

It could be the zeroes in our bank account. It could be an enviable marriage or social connectedness. It could be our kids and their accomplishments.

It could be—indeed very often *is*, particularly among the young—the impression we're making online, all the metrics of likes and clicks and views and followers and subscriptions.

I think we all have *some* area of our lives that we look to measure our worth, our acceptability, our "enoughness."

And none of it works in the end.

It may get us through a season in life. We may limp along, borrowing our sense of being "enough" from these various domains of life. But eventually, it will all be taken away.

Even Novak Djokovic's body will one day betray him, to say nothing of yours and mine. Our accomplishments will fade from memory.

Pick any way we try to justify ourselves or prove that we're enough—eventually it won't be up to the task, and we will have to wrestle with the deep question of how, ultimately, we believe that we are justified.

Is it something we achieve? That we earn? That we deserve? Or it something we are given? It it a trophy? Or is it a free gift?

From a Christian perspective, the answer to the problem of feeling like we're not "enough" is not "try harder, do better."

It is, "receive the gift of the God who has already demonstrated your worth on Calvary's cross."

In our text from Romans this morning, we heard these words:

> You see, at just the right time, **when we were still powerless**, Christ died for the ungodly. [7] Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. [8] But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: **While we were still sinners, Christ died for us**.

The timing in this passage is the most important part. *When we were still powerless*… *While we were still sinners*…

Before we earned anything, deserved anything, before we justified ourselves through our hard work and ambition… before *anything*, Christ died for us.

This is the staggering hope at the centre of the Christian faith.

All our trying and our doing should only ever be a grateful response to this free gift, not an attempt to earn it.

This is not easy to do.

We are generally pretty lousy at grace. We long for it in our deepest and truest moments, and we desperately need it.

But we often struggle to receive it. We'd rather earn, justify, merit, rank up, achieve. Grace is for the weak and that's not us.

We prefer our illusions of sufficiency and control. Until we aren't sufficient and until we realize that we actually have much less control over the things that really matter than we think we do.

We're even worse at extending grace, particularly to those we are convinced will treat it recklessly and wastefully. Those who most need it, in other words.

We are far more interested in and skilled at scorekeeping and evaluating.

We think people should always and only get what they deserve.

Grace is hard because it is radically levelling. We are all in the same boat, whether we're on a New York tennis court or a southern Alberta prison cell or anywhere in between.

Grace is, indeed, amazing; but it is also amazingly hard to accept.

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So, on this first Sunday of our fall series I want to end with this idea of grace as a gift.

The Nigerian theologian Nimi Wariboko once said this about grace:

> Grace, by definition, is a genuine gift and not a secretly instrumentalized one. Freely it is given and freely it is received. **It has no purpose, no self-addressed envelope from the giver to send something in return**.

When I think back on my life thus far and how grace has been presented, I don't think I've ever consistently heard the message that grace is a genuine gift and not a "secretly instrumentalized one."

The more conservative version of Mennonite faith that I grew up in talked about grace a lot, but usually as a preamble to the more serious business of "accepting Jesus into your heart" and embracing a pretty rigid doctrinal package about who God was, who God wasn't, who God accepted, who God didn't, and what this "free gift" actually required.

In the more liberal version of Mennonite faith that I presently inhabit, talk of God's grace, when it makes an appearance, is the means by which we are "set free" to get busy following Jesus on the activist trail. There are injustices to resist, politics to embrace (or condemn). Jesus is an inspiring but demanding moral teacher, so we'd better get busy changing the world!

In both cases, grace is quickly instrumentalized. The "self-addressed envelope" demands something in return.

This instrumentalizing of the gift of grace is among the church's more well-traveled paths.

I know of too many people who have walked away from the church because they quickly discovered that the word "grace" was a trojan horse by which to smuggle in a whole checklist of things that this grace demanded.

And yet, in Christ we encounter a genuine giver offering genuine gifts. Gifts of forgiveness, of hope, of truth, of mercy, of even judgment in the sense of making-things-right.

The gift of a love that extends beyond deserving.

Not love as a prelude to a theology exam, not love as a thin justification for a socio-political agenda. Love is a genuine gift, that settles the question of our "enoughness" once and for all.

Romans 5:1-2:

> Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

Grace is the most important, urgent, and radical contribution Christianity has to offer the world. We must never forget this.

Grace is where we stand.

Amen

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