**Stamped with Grace**

Genesis 12:1-4a
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

It has happened to me more than once. I am sure it has happened to you. You open your mail box and start going through the assorted mail. You separate the bills from the junk mail. You carefully put aside your church newsletter so that you can read each and every word at your leisure. Unless, of course, you are getting it electronically, in which case you print it out so that you can carefully read about all the important things that are happening at Cherokee Park United. Going through the day’s mail, you suddenly see a letter that looks familiar and you get that sinking feeling as the awareness grows this is a letter you mailed a couple weeks ago. Unfortunately you forgot the stamp. It makes no difference how important the letter is or what it contains, without a stamp you might as well have never sent the letter in the first place. It has been returned to you, the sender, never having been delivered.

 As we know, the Apostle Paul was a letter writer. Nearly half of the New Testament is comprised of letters written by Paul or attributed to Paul. Paul, of course, did not have the type of postal system we have today. In one of his satirical comedy sketches, John Stewart from the Daily Show, makes fun of those complaining we now have to pay 49 cents to have a letter picked up at our house and then delivered across the country to an address we have chosen. Paul had no such delivery system. When Paul wanted a letter delivered he made arrangements with someone going to Corinth, Rome, Philippi or as was the case with the Colossians, he sent someone for the specific purpose of delivering the letter. Imagine if I said to you, “would you mail a letter for me?” You no doubt would say “yes, I will drop by the post office on my way home or drop it in the mail box on Smith Avenue.” But then imagine I said, “no I mean deliver it to Duluth or Mason City, Iowa or Chicago”. That was the delivery system available to Paul.

 Yet, even with this old delivery system Paul shares our concern for having a stamp on the letter. He knows that without this postage, the letter might just as well never be mailed. An unstamped letter for Paul is a letter that will never reach the heart of the recipient and so Paul begins every letter with the stamp of grace. To the Romans, Paul writes, “Grace to you and peace”. To the Corinthians, Paul writes, “Grace to you and peace”. To the Galatians, Paul writes, “Grace to you and peace.” Often Paul not only begins with grace but concludes his letters as well with “Grace be with all,” as he does in his letter to the Ephesians or “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” as he does in his letter to the people in Phillipi. Again and again, what we see in the letters of Paul is that they are stamped with grace.

 I imagine in this age of email, texting and twitter, Paul would be

among those utilizing this new form of technology. You can picture Paul sending out a tweet, “faith, hope and love abide.” Or, maybe “love never ends” or perhaps ‘where the spirit of God is, there is liberty.” But, anyone even a little familiar with Paul knows that Paul was not a tweeting type of guy. Paul takes his time unpacking what it is he feels inspired to say and most of it needs more characters than available in a text or a tweet.

 Yet, perhaps the biggest reason for Paul taking time to write a letter has nothing to do with the limitations of the technology available to him at the time. Paul lives with the conviction that Christ makes possible a new humanity, one which breaks down all the divisions, barriers and walls we create, calling us to be ambassadors of reconciliation. No matter how strongly Paul feels, no matter how upset he might become, as he does with the Galatians, writing “You foolish Galatians. Who has bewitched you?” even when dealing with tension and conflict Paul knows that letters are about relationships.

This, of course, is one of the huge downsides to our modern technology, the relationships too often get forgotten. We can say what we want to say without any reference or thought about the person who is the recipient of our communication. Emails, texts and tweets, are sent without the slightest concern for the person who is the recipient. Occasionally Paul has someone write the letter for him as he tells them what he wants said, but often Paul concludes his letters by saying, “See what large letters I make when writing in my own hand.” Paul takes the time to put pen in hand because Paul knows that as an ambassadors of Christ, relationships are central to who we are.

 Yet, even this personal, relational touch by itself is insufficient for having mail delivered to the heart of the recipient. Postage is essential, which means for Paul the stamp of grace on every letter that he sends.

You might, of course, rightly ask, “what does it mean to be stamped by grace and where does one get this postage?”

 One thing grace never means for Paul is a lessening of conviction. I share the views of scholars like Neil Elliot and John Dominic Crossan who argue Paul has often gotten a very bad and undeserved wrap. Much of the conservative language attributed to Paul about the role of women or tacit approval of slavery comes from letters attributed to Paul, but written by later Christians who were seeking to reign in some of the more radical impulses of Paul’s egalitarian theology. Facing persecution from Rome, the last thing these later Christians wanted was attention drawn to their community because they were undermining the domination and hierarchy of Rome. Yet, when one looks at the letters we know were written by Paul, undermining the domination of Rome and all systems of injustice is precisely what Paul does.

Paul is seeking to create communities of faith in which the justice and love of God’s Realm can be seen. Whenever, people say to Paul, “what evidence do you have that a new world has begun, the Realm of God is here? As far as I can tell nothing has changed. Rome’s still in charge. The powerful still oppress the poor and the week”. Paul’s response is to say “come and see for yourself; it can be experienced among those who follow Christ”. Grace never means for Paul a lessening of his conviction. He is a passionate believer in the love and justice of God being lived out in our world, here and now.

 “Grace and Peace to you,” this is the postage stamp that Paul puts on every letter. Our great temptation, of course, is to feel it is all up to us. If change is going to happen, if our words, our actions are going to have an impact, it is because of what we do. This was the challenge faced by Christians in Rome. They are succumbing to the belief that if the promise of God’s Realm, the hope of God’s love and justice is to become a reality it will be because of what they are doing, the work they accomplish.

It makes no difference what our particular concern or issue might be. It could be global climate change, minimum wage, gun violence, or affordable housing. It could be conflict within one’s family or as it often seemed to be for Paul, conflict with members of the church. Whatever the cause, whatever the concern, it is tempting for us, as it was for the Romans to feel that our words, our actions are the critical ingredient. It is all up to us. As a result we start to jam our letters full of all the facts and data we can muster to support our cause and convince the recipient about the rightness and righteousness of our cause. But, without the stamp of grace our words and our efforts, as Paul says in his letters to the Corinthians, are like a noisy gong and clanging cymbal. They return to us undelivered, never having reached the heart of the recipient.

Pointing to Abraham, the great ancestor of faith, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Paul says, Abraham never puts his faith or trust in his own abilities to fulfill the promise of God. Again and again, Abraham puts his trust in God. “For this reason,” says Paul, “it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.” Put simply, grace is the love of God at work in our world in ways we can never fully imagine.

 As you have heard announced, and seen in your bulletin, during this season of Lent we are engaging in a new spiritual discipline “Praying with Letters”. The invitation is for us to come together in community and write letters to elected officials on matters of justice that are dear to our hearts. If the impact of our letter writing is limited to the cleverness of our words, the brilliance of our arguments, the undisputable facts and data that we muster, if it is all up to us, than we have little reason to believe that anything we are doing will make any difference at all. But, our letter writing is happening in the context of worship, as part of a Lenten spiritual discipline, because it is our intention to have these letters stamped with grace, trusting the spirit of God to be at work.

Paul, of course, has a bigger agenda than simply helping us avoid the frustration of opening our mail box and finding undelivered communication, because we forgot the stamp of grace. Paul’s agenda is to remind us that as a community of faith, as followers of Christ, we are the letters and that it’s God’s grace at work in our lives that makes a difference in our world. In all we do, in all we become, remember the stamp of grace.

**Genesis 12:1-4a**

*Our first lesson begins the story of the covenant God establishes with Abraham. Central to the covenant God establishes is the purpose of the covenant, which has too often been forgotten. “I will bless you…so that you may be a blessing.” With only this promise to guide him, Abraham sets forth from the familiar into the unknown, trusting the word of God.*

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

**Romans 4:1-5, 13-17**

*In this letter to the Romans, Paul, engages a debate about how God is at work in our world. There are many who feel that if God’s promise is to be fulfilled, it will be because of the work we do, our faithfulness to the law. Yet, using Abraham as an example, Paul insists that our work and our faithfulness to the law is never enough to bring about the promise of God. The promise says Paul depends on faith, because ultimately the promise of God’s love and justice rests on the grace of God.*

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") — in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.