***November 14, 2021 Acts 2:42-47***

***Let’s Practice Together***

**Scripture:** Acts 2:42-47 NRSV

*(42)They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (43)Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. (44)All who believed were together and had all things in common; (45)they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (46)Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, (47)praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

**Notes:**

1. What ***sustains*** the grace at work in our lives?
   1. To some this will feel like ***works*** righteousness;
   2. For others the practice of faith is an ***experience***;
   3. For some it’s ***behaviors***.
   4. For some it’s about ***knowledge***.
   5. For others it’s about being **super**-***spiritual***.
   6. But none of these concepts used alone are ***sufficient***.
2. It takes a ***means*** of ***grace*** to change us in our heart
   1. The ***means*** of ***grace*** are ways in which the God works in our lives so that we are able to be changed from the sinful creature that we were into the righteous being God intended us to be.
   2. The ***means*** of ***grace*** includes Discipleship,
   3. We need ***community*** and ***fellowship*** in order for each of us to grow in knowledge and behavior.
   4. We need to share in public acts of ***evangelism***.
   5. The Sacraments are another ***means*** of ***grace***.
3. We also find the practice of ***Nurturing*** Grace.
   1. They are ***together***,
   2. They meet ***regularly***,
   3. They are ***vulnerable***,
   4. They ***practice*** the faith together.
   5. They ***learn*** together.
   6. They ***witness*** together.
   7. The Lord’s ***sustaining*** ***grace*** is in the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines.

**Script:**

As I have walked this walk with Jesus, as I have traveled this journey of grace, I have encountered many different types of people. Some who have really demonstrated the life of a Christian, being dedicated to following Jesus and doing whatever it is that they are asked. Others have been conflicted followers. These are people who struggle to stay on the straight and narrow path. They meet obstacles, become distracted, and soon are wondering off to follow something different. Then there are the Christians who proclaim to be on fire for Christ, but in reality, they are looking for the next big thing, or the draw of the mega-church. They like the preachers who can sell the gospel with lots of raw emotion and come off as being all hyped up. But when they are truly tested, they are show boats trying to look what their perception of a Christian follower should be. They want to experience the fire of Christ through somebody else’s actions. Then there are those who submit to Christ but soon fall away because t seems to difficult. There are those who do not take the time to become discipled and invest in learning what it means to be a follower of Christ.

What all of these people have in common is that they have come to Jesus in search of having their needs met. There are epic moments when they feel the power of God on a mountaintop experience. But when they come of f of that experience the fervor begins to fade and they soon become discouraged. Then they disappear.

You see, if people fail to dig roots through steady, consistent practices of faith, they will often disappear when the emotional highs begin to fade and the novelty of grace begins to wear off. They are the people who come and seem so alive in the church for a bit of time and then their attendance begins to drop off, and soon they only come occasionally. You see as followers of Christ there is this necessity to consistently practice our faith, nurturing and nourishing the grace we live daily. It must become a daily exercise of our faith where we are practicing the things we learn and demonstrating for others what it means to cooperate with God’s grace throughout our lives. Today in our passage we see what the first believers and converts did in order to keep their faith fresh and consistently moving forward. Stand with me as we read our sermon passage from Acts 2:42-47

*(42)They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (43)Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. (44)All who believed were together and had all things in common; (45)they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (46)Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, (47)praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47 NRSV*

What sustains the grace at work in our lives? This can be tricky because to some this will feel like works righteousness; the idea that we can make it to heaven by being a good and upstanding person. What people need to understand is that there is a difference between working to try to earn grace and working the grace God has afforded us. So many times, we have reduced the practice of our faith to that one thing, the good things that we do.

For others the practice of faith is an experience; the euphoria that you feel when you first come to Jesus and know that your sins have been forgiven. It is the rush of endorphins that you experience when you sing the songs that make the crowds shout with joy and raise their hands clapping along with the music. It is the exhilaration that is felt as others are being blessed and you are caught up in the whirlwind of emotions and praises in a service that the Spirit has taken over. But when we do not experience these things on a weekly basis, we begin to feel that the spirit has left the building.

For some it’s behaviors. Yes, we have received grace as a gift, but now we need to put into place all the rules and behaviors. Grace was a gift delivering freedom and now we have to live so as to not lose that freedom. Our rules become our constraints on sinfulness, our rules are there to eliminate, or reduce, the risk of temptation and sin. However, living under the letter of the law can and often will lead to legalism. However, legalism cannot sustain a meaningful journey of grace.

For some it’s about knowledge. We sustain our faith and grace by having the right knowledge, filling our minds with helpful facts about Jesus, about the scriptures and the history of those who have been written about in the scriptures. We spend our lives learning, defending, and arguing propositional truths. It’s about the right version of the scriptures, about the right interpretation of the Bible, the right theological doctrines. Still, right knowledge without a right heart will leave us wanting; remember Satan could quote scripture as well as any.

For others it’s about being super-spiritual. We believe that if we just get alone, read our Bible enough, pray enough, and volunteer for enough ministries, that will do it. We attack our spirituality with the same vigor soldiers attack their training. We become obsessive about our quiet time. We beat ourselves up for perceived failures of discipline. We live our lives adhering to the spiritual disciplines but fail to live the Christian life. Soon we’ll become defeated, wondering where we went wrong.

There’s nothing wrong with any of these concepts. We are called to perform works of righteousness. Experiences are good. Rules can be used to create helpful boundaries, we need to know what we believe, and spiritual disciplines play an important role in our Christian walk. But none of these concepts used alone are sufficient. We need to balance out each of these things in order to walk faithfully, act accordingly, understand wholly, believe clearly, and experience everything the Lord has in store for us.

But how do we get to a point where we are able to balance these things. It takes a means of grace to change us in our heart so that we are able to have the right attitude and purpose in demonstrating our faith. According to John Wesley, means of grace are ways God works invisibly in disciples, hastening, strengthening; and confirming faith so that God's grace pervades in and through disciples.

When we see people who are having medical issues, they usually will seek medical advice and direction. In some cases, changes in their lifestyle will be all that is needed. But in other cases, a change in lifestyle and medication is necessary. I am diabetic. Had I heeded all the advice before the diagnosis was final, I would have taken precautions to improve my health. But I did not and so the Dr first put me on a diet. When I failed in that aspect, he began me on a regimen of medications, which have increased progressively over the years. The means of grace are ways in which the God works in our lives so that we are able to be changed from the sinful creature that we were into the righteous being God intended us to be.

The means of grace help to transform us as we draw closer to the Lord in our daily walk and faith. The means of grace includes Discipleship, studying God’s word, discussing it with others in order to better understand what it means for each of us. It includes personal devotional times so that we become in the habit of talking with the Lord, and listening for him to speak to us; learning to recognize the Lord’s voice as well.

The means of grace includes public worship and times of prayer and study. We gather for services each week as a part of this. We cannot improve in our walk if we are never accountable to others and they never improve unless somebody holds them accountable as well. We need community and fellowship in order for each of us to grow in knowledge and behavior. We need likeminded friends to help encourage us in our difficulties and be our example as we learn to walk in His ways.

We need to share in public acts of worship, but also in public acts of ministry; we know this as evangelism. We share the grace and love of Jesus to the people of our communities who may not know who Jesus is. We extend Mercy to those who are having difficulties. This is our opportunity to share with others what we have found in our walk with Christ and encourage them to seek a similar walk.

Each of us who participate in these acts do so in the endeavor of drawing closer to the Lord and becoming more like him. But the sacraments are another means of grace. Sacrament comes from the Latin word that means to consecrate, to hallow or make holy, to make sacred. A sacrament is a sacred Mystery. John Wesley identified the sacraments as an outward sign of inward grace and a means by which we receive the same. N.T. Wright describes the sacraments as those occasions when the life of heaven intersects mysteriously with life here on earth.

Depending on your faith background you may have learned of many different sacraments; but the Church of the Nazarene recognizes Baptism and the Eucharist (otherwise known as the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion) as sacraments. John Wesley also referred to the Lord’s supper as the grand channel whereby grace is conveyed to us; and identified participation in the Lord’s supper as the first step in working out our salvation. He perceived the Lord’s Supper as a moment where the believer is sitting at the same table as Christ and the other disciples and is partaking in the very same meal we read about in scripture. We are truly in the presence of the Lord at this time and we are being spoken to personally from the Lord.

We also find the practice of Nurturing Grace. As we return to our passage in Acts, we can see that from the beginning, from their most formative moments, the members of the early church instituted consistent communal practices that were necessary to shape and sustain their lives in Christ. Discipleship, or learning more about Christ and how to following his teachings; Fellowship, or spending time together and sharing with one another; caring for one another, learning from one another; and Evangelism, or helping others come to the Lord, encouraging others, praying for others, praying with others; These early Christians knew how to keep their faith alive.

They are together, they are not trying to do it all on their own. As they spend this time together, they learn and grow. They experience God together. When one has a struggle, they all struggle together, when one has a breakthrough or victory, they all celebrate together. The experience of God is experienced in this community.

They meet regularly, meaning that they are not too busy to spend time together with their Christian brothers and sisters. They make getting together a priority and they stick to it. Notice they were all in the upper room. They were in fellowship, sharing and caring together.

They are vulnerable, they share their worries, they share their cares, they share their hardships, they are open and up front with each other. They are not afraid to reveal their weaknesses. They are not hindered in sharing their concerns. Like our time of praises and requests on Sunday mornings, they bring their requests, their concerns, and their needs, to the group openly so that they may be met as a whole.

They practice the faith together. Which brings me to the question, “how can you practice the faith in Jesus Christ alone?” Alone there is nobody to talk to about your concerns. Alone there is nobody to encourage you. Alone there is nobody that you can call upon when you have a need. But in community, there are people all around you, many who have similar experiences that could be of help.

They learn together. Learning from another is much easier than trying to learn from just reading a text. The disciples learned directly from Jesus, and then in turn they taught the earliest Christians. Even Paul after his conversion had to be with others to learn what Jesus said and taught. We learn best when we learn from others, with others, so we can discuss and clarify the things we have doubts about.

They witness together. It is so easy to testify to God’s goodness when we are testifying to another believer. But it becomes increasingly more difficult when we are sharing with a non-believer. All of a sudden, we have doubts, we stumble over words, and sometimes we can’t find the words. It only makes sense that when we share our witness with non-believers, that we are more comfortable and more effective when we do it in pairs, that is how Jesus taught the disciples to do it when he sent them out in pairs to witness to others.

The Lord’s sustaining grace is found in many ways, but most of all in the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines. The practice of faith through consistent means of grace doesn’t limit the value of grace; it simply means we are responsible to cooperate with God’s grace throughout our lives.

Today as we close, we are going to share in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper is a communal practice of God’s sustaining grace. The Lord’s Supper is an invitation, a call, to a regular remembrance of and a participation in the grace of God that has claimed our lives. We do it together, reminding us that together as a community we are dependent on the grace of God.

The Lord’s Supper is an act of receiving. We do not take the elements, but they are freely given to us. And, we receive them remembering that all of life is a gift from God. That salvation is also a free gift from God brought to us in the supreme sacrifice for our sin, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.