

Out of the Closet
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
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Preached June 21, 2015 at San José, Costa Rica

My mother, bless her heart, ever in search of the perfect combination of Christmas gifts, is always buying me little gadgety things for my car, none of which I really would have bought for myself, like a mug you can plug into the cigarette lighter to keep your coffee warm, or a storage unit for between the front seats to keep little treasures in, and if you can keep a secret for me, the truth is that most of them I just go hide in the closet. Her idea of the perfect gift and mine don't always coincide. You've done this too, I know you have. Maybe it wasn't gadgety stuff for your car, but who doesn't have a part of a closet reserved for that certain, special kind of a gift?

There was this one time, however, when putting my mother's gift in the closet turned out to be a bad idea. She had given me this "multi-tool," the kind you see on TV that was supposed to be able to turn any bolt, no matter what size or shape or level of damage. I mean, the scammiest TV offer of all time. And of course, I already had a decent set of wrenches I carried around in the trunk of the car and so I figured I didn't need this cheap substitute, so I "put it in the closet" and forgot all about it. Well, wouldn't you know that one day, far from home, the car wouldn't start, and opening the hood, I found the offending part, which of course, had a bolt that none of my wrenches would turn. I tried and tried but every

tool in my box just slipped right off and I eventually had to walk a mile to find a telephone to call a wrecker to have it towed, only to see the mechanic pull out of his toolbox one of those very same “multi-tools,” and charge me \$45 for the pleasure of watching his wisdom at work. Do not *ever* tell my mother this story.

“Do not accept the grace of God in vain,” writes the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth. Do not put God’s gift in a closet and forget about it, because one day, maybe one day soon, the day is coming when you’ll need it, and you may be even farther from home, even farther from a telephone, without \$45 in your pocket, and really needing to get somewhere in a hurry, and then what will you do? Of course, God’s grace is capable of doing so much more than turning a stuck bolt, and so how much more should we take Paul’s advice? How much like the rest of the sometimes inconvenient gifts we receive do we treat God’s somewhat inconvenient gift of grace? I mean, let’s face it, wearing God on our sleeve is sometimes a lot like wearing a really tacky Christmas sweater – we get shunned just about as easily doing either. Grace is, or it should be, as loud and pesky as a bad sweater. Do we have the courage to put it on and wear it in public? Or do we hide it away in a closet?

It seems that the Corinthian church had not really fully grasped all that Paul had tried to teach them as he established the church, and as he wrote his earlier letters. He still needs to speak to them as if they were children about what grace is really all about, about what God’s gift of Jesus Christ really meant for them and for

the whole world. Our passage tonight is the conclusion of a long section where he is once again explaining what the gift is all about, namely that they now have the possibility of truly knowing God, and the hope of really knowing one another as God knows them. “From now on,” he tells them a little earlier in the letter, “From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view,” in other words, grace is the gift of seeing with divine eyes that all are loved and valued by God despite what differences we might see with our human eyes. And because we can see more like God sees, we can also love one another more like God loves us. It’s a lot harder for us than for God, to be sure, but it is no longer impossible.

It’s a tradition that might be going out of style with electronic communications, or maybe it’s just changing, but once upon a time, when you received a gift, whether you put it in the closet or not, you wrote a thank you letter to the person who had given it to you. My Grandmother was a real stickler for this social grace and could recall for you going back at least a decade who had not properly thanked her for a birthday or Christmas gift. She would have made Paul proud. You see, that’s what his exhaustive list about his trials and tribulations, his virtues and values, his perseverance and his patience is really all about, detailing how grateful and faithful he has been to the giver of the gift, and how grateful and faithful we should all be. These Corinthians should not have to be reminded to give thanks for the message he brought them; they should be knocking down the door in

gratitude to God, if not to Paul for being the messenger. But they seem not to be able to be either grateful or faithful.

And so he makes this longwinded point to distance himself from their bad behavior. It's like my grandmother reciting a list of all the gifts she ever received and when and how she wrote thank you notes for them, no matter the circumstances. Paul wants to make sure neither they, nor anyone else, have reason to blame him for their failure to put to good use the grace he has brought them. He hasn't given them damaged goods, or a cheap knock-off, or a something with a built-in obsolescence that they'll have to replace in a little while. No, he has passed on to them something so valuable he himself was willing to suffer for it, something so compelling he never forgot it in the midst of all of his accolades and successes. In season or out of season, he has treated the gift with the respect it deserves.

Grace is the possibility of reconciliation with God and the hope of reconciliation with one another. Paul has described this earlier in the book, how by what God has done in Jesus Christ, he and everyone else called by the Gospel are now ambassadors for that Christ, the ones who make Christ known. They have the chance to overcome all the alienation that comes from sin, and be ambassadors for reconciliation. And so, by accepting it in vain, he means that they have chosen to ignore or take for granted this wondrous possibility, that they have accepted it without really accepting it.

What does accepting grace in vain really mean in today's terms, in our lives? Well, maybe it means failing to live generously, graciously, with the "open hearts" with which he concludes this section. Maybe it means failing to share the good news of reconciliation or taking credit for it as if it we had come up with the idea ourselves. Maybe it is failing to let it affect our lives and relationships; after all, what does reconciliation mean if not that our relationships are changed? Maybe it is failing to look at every other human being from a divine perspective. Maybe it just comes down to living our lives as if God just doesn't have anything to do with them except for an hour on Sunday.

Perhaps if a few more of us hadn't accepted God's grace in vain, those nine people killed this week at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina would still be alive. Maybe if a few more of us hadn't hidden away the gift in a closet, that shooter would have been able to see everyone through divine eyes instead of his human eyes which only saw a different color of skin.

Perhaps if a few more of us hadn't accepted God's grace in vain, thousands of Syrian refugees wouldn't be pouring into Europe on rickety boats in high seas.

Perhaps if a few more of us hadn't accepted God's grace in vain, young girls wouldn't be forced into the sex tourism trade or young boys into weaving carpets for twelve hours a day in a darkened room.

Perhaps if a few more of us hadn't accepted God's grace in vain, churches could work together and solve the problems in their communities.

Perhaps if a few more of us hadn't accepted God's grace in vain, Christ could really be seen among us, and the life and reconciliation promised to all could be experienced by all.

This is one of those passages that are like a little spiritual gut check – a little, “how am I doing in the faith?” moment. Paul's offers his list of things to think about, and I've offered mine, but the point of neither of them is to make anyone feel guilty. No, to recall how valuable is this grace, and to examine how we've been faithful to it or not, is simply to remind us of what is at stake in our lives and in the world.

We may try to hide away God's grace, but you can no more do that than hide a sunrise or sunset at the beach, or your child or grandchild's smile. You can hide away your portion of it, but grace is going to carry on, with or without you. It's just that it will carry on so much more wonderfully when everyone is added in, when we all carry around every day this gift that lifts our spirits and guides our way and opens our hearts and helps us to remember that we live not only for ourselves but for the one who died and was raised for us. Imagine if we all lived that way all the time. Or imagine if even just a few more of us did. Or simply imagine if you did. May God help us to reserve our closets for what really belongs in them, and to hold fast to the gift of grace in Jesus Christ. Amen.