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November 25, 2007
Thanks Giving Grace
Rev. Valena Hoy

Good morning. We are not in a sermon series this week. Thanksgiving Sunday stands alone, but we are focusing on giving thanks and how our giving thanks also pours out grace into our own lives and into those that are around us.

Our Old Testament lesson is from the prophet Jeremiah. The prophet Jeremiah had a really big task and he had a lot of words of condemnation and decimation for the people of Israel. We enter into the Book of Jeremiah at a point where there is a collection of phrases and of poetry on hope. It's called the Book of Hope, the Book of Consolation. It starts in the 30th chapter and moves through the 31st chapter and actually all the way through to chapter 33. There's a building theme of restoration and hope for the people of Israel after all of the destruction and the exile and bitterness that they have been through. This particular passage talks about a new covenant, and this is actually the only passage in all of Scripture, in Old Testament Scripture, that talks about that new covenant. That new covenant we believe is Jesus Christ and His dying for our sins. Jeremiah is given a glimpse of this new covenant and what it looks like and what the Lord does for this new covenant - basically to forget sin, to not remember it anymore. It's totally erased from the divine memory of God. He doesn't keep a list of sins somewhere but He actually erases it even from His memory.

Let's enter in as we hear of this new covenant that is a glimpse for us for the future and changes our lives presently because we know what is coming to us.

Old Testament Reading – Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Turning to the New Testament, we are in the 3rd chapter of the 2nd letter to the Corinthians. This chapter in 2nd Corinthians is very dense. It contains part of Paul's argument, a sustained defense actually, of his ministry. People have been picking at him because they haven't agreed with some of the choices that he's made and travel plans and how he is to spread the Gospel. He is being attacked and he begins this defense. Paul is an amazing mind; he is very intelligent. When he starts to argue, it's one verse on top of another. It just continues to build and to build and to build, and so you'll see as I read through this how one verse just adds on the next and adds on to the next. To complicate things he uses references to the Old Testament, specifically the Jeremiah passage that we just read, and he also talks about Moses. Moses is a huge character in the Old Testament, a huge hero in the Jewish faith and he talks about Moses receiving the law. You need to understand a few things, especially if you don't know about Moses' shiny face in the veil. Do you know about that? Just in case you don't I want to explain it to you because you're not going to understand hardly anything that Paul is saying if you don't know a little bit of the background.

The first time Moses went up on Mount Sinai and talked to the Lord and when he came down the Lord gave the Ten Commandments and it was a big deal – there was smoke and thunderclouds and lightning and there was a lot of stuff going on. The people were overwhelmed and they accepted the law, they accepted these Ten Commandments, and they said, "We will live these out." Then, after this big worship experience, Moses goes back on top of the mountain and talks about some details about the law, and let me tell you, if you've read the details of the law they're not real exciting, but they're important. Moses and God are talking about the details and Moses is gone for a couple of chapters and the people start getting restless. They look to Aaron and they're like, "Where did Moses go? We had this huge big experience and then he just goes back up the mountain. What's up with that?" Moses is gone so they decide to collect all their gold jewelry together, this is starting to sound familiar, and they make a golden calf. They decide that they are going to commit idolatry and worship this golden calf. The Lord sees this and He says to Moses, "You'd better go back down to your people down there." He says, "**Your** people" to Moses, not "His people," "**Your** people and see what they have done." So, Moses intercedes for them, but when he comes down the mountain he had the two tablets with the Ten Commandments on them and he's so angry at the people that he throws them down and he breaks them. He destroys the golden calf and throws it in the water and makes the people drink it – just really gross.

We keep going and Moses goes up the mountain again and he's gone for forty days. When he returns he basically reinstitutes the law, reinstitutes the Ten Commandments and gets two new tablets with the Ten Commandments on them. When he comes back down the mountain, Aaron sees him coming and he's like, "Whoa. Moses, what is going on?" Because Moses didn't know it, but his face was beaming, it was shining. It was so bright because he had been in the presence of the Lord. So, from this time on when Moses spoke to the people he would speak to them with a veiled face so that they wouldn't be overcome by the glory of God shining through him. When Moses went to talk to God in the tent of meeting, that's the only time he took the veil off. From this point on, when God talks about the people of Israel, He talks about them as stiff-necked people. He's really angry with them. Stiff-necked people, people that really need to go see a chiropractor, people who are so filled with their own sin that they can't turn to God. They are stuck; they are stuck in sin.

When Paul talks about Moses and the veil and the law he sees the end for those people as death. Even though He's given them the law again, He's still very angry. Something has to happen. Something has to happen and what happens is Jesus Christ and the new covenant and Christ dying for those sins and our sins and for the sins of all of creation. He opens up and He takes the veil away so that we can be in the presence of glory. That's what Paul's talking about in this argument. Here we go.

New Testament Reading – 2 Corinthians 3

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we?

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all;

and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.

Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God,

who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses' face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside,

how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?

For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory!

Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory;

for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory!

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness,

not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside.

But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside.

Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds;

but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Wednesday morning we were in here and there were these sweet kids from our pre-school, three year-olds and four year-olds and kindergarteners, and they were doing their Thanksgiving chapel and they were so incredibly adorable. They sang about eating turkey and giving thanks, and as they were talking and actually before they were talking, for some reason this particular Thanksgiving, I've been wanting to be reminded about what the first Thanksgiving was like and there's kind of a controversy over exactly where the first Thanksgiving was but we all like to think that the first Thanksgiving was in Massachusetts at Plymouth Rock with the settlers there who we call Pilgrims. In Wikipedia, the encyclopedia on the Internet – I just found out about it this week; it's a very cool thing – you can look up almost anything. You type it in and it tells you all about it and so I did that with Thanksgiving. It talks about this Thanksgiving meal in 1621 that the Pilgrims had. They were very thankful for a particular Indian called Squanto¹, because Squanto taught them how to hunt eel and to grow corn. What happened at the first harvest is that they were so thankful for the food that they had, for being alive, that they invited the Native American tribe that Squanto was a part of to come for a feast, so they had three days of food and feasting and praising God together, and after those three days the Native Americans who were invited went out into the woods and killed five deer as a thank-you present and brought them to the Governor, and that's what we call the traditional Thanksgiving. Pretty neat. Pretty neat to be reminded of that. I actually had not thought about Pilgrims and Indians sitting at the same table since I was in fifth grade, which was a long time ago.

Thanksgiving has kind of evolved hasn't it? It's not quite the same. We all have different Thanksgiving traditions. I think for every person that I talked with on Wednesday about what they were doing, they were doing something really, really different, either going to a restaurant so they didn't have to worry about cleaning up, or one person cooks everything, or each person who comes cooks something. In our family, I'm usually in charge of the green vegetable.

As I was thinking about Thanksgiving, and some of the folks that I talked to were not real excited about going home for Thanksgiving, going home to a parent that had abused them in the past, or going home and seeing someone who had betrayed them years before, family members who hadn't even seen each other in 20 years. A lot of stress can happen around the holidays and it reminded me of a story. I don't know if it's true or not, but I love telling it anyway because it has a lot of truth in it about a family who was getting ready for a meal, a Thanksgiving meal. The dad was outside cutting the grass and making sure the bushes looked nice and the mom was inside slaving away in the kitchen making sure everything was going well in there and cleaning up and making sure that everything was ready for the company that was coming over. Finally everyone is sitting around the table and the mom and dad especially are exhausted sitting at the table and will really be glad when everyone just goes home, but they are all sitting there and the youngest child says to his mom, "Mom, I would like to give the Thanksgiving blessing." She was like, "Well, okay." So, they all hold hands and they bow their heads and he said, "I'm going

to pray a prayer that I learned from you, Mommy.” She was like, “Wow. Okay.” She was just really excited. They bow their heads and close their eyes and he says, “Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all of these people over for dinner? (laughter)” Yeah. Interesting. I wonder how those guests felt after that. Isn’t it interesting how stressed out we can get about a simple meal, when really Thanksgiving is about showing up. It’s about showing up at the table and being thankful for the people that you are with, but we get so stressed out. I don’t know about you, but I’m going to my chiropractor on Monday to get loosened up again, to get readjusted.

What these two passages are talking about today, the one in Jeremiah where we have this beautiful vision of the law being written on our hearts and everyone will know the Lord. You don’t have to teach about Him; we’ll know Him in our very being, in our very living and our iniquity and our sins will not keep us from God any more, will not keep us from one another anymore. They’ll be erased. They’ll be forgotten. Then in the New Testament, Paul talking about the end of this argument for him is not death, but it’s life, there’s life at the end of the this argument about ministry and about what he is about. It’s not about Moses unveiling his face and hiding from the people, it’s about the Lord taking the veil away so that we can all see each other and see the Lord in His glory face to face. Pretty amazing. Pretty awesome – this glimpse of the future, this glimpse of forgiveness and glory and light and mercy.

Wednesday was a big day here. We had the preschool chapel in the morning and then in the evening we had a Thanksgiving Eve service that Jim Gates led. It was so beautiful. It was a beautiful service. In the midst of the service he invited everyone to get a thank you card that was included as an insert in the bulletin. The thank you card was a thank you card to Jesus. On the inside it says, “Jesus, thank you for 1. _____, 2. _____, 3. _____.” He invited us to write three things that we want to thank Jesus for and as we came up for Communion we were to place our thank you card in the basket and then go get Communion. I did mine early because I wanted to be prepared. I was sitting up in the front. I just watched as people came down the aisle and placed their thank you cards in the baskets. We had several families there and some of our younger members didn’t walk up the aisle, but they ran down the aisle and threw their thank you cards into the basket. It was really, really neat. I noticed in the people that were coming forward several young singles who were in line that put their thank you cards in and I thought about Jim telling me about the Thanksgiving meal that they served to our Park Place Child Life Center kids this past Saturday. They fixed a whole Thanksgiving meal – prepared it, cooked it and served it on Saturday, and they had enough leftovers that the kids could take some of that food home. I saw other folks coming forward that I know their stories and I could only imagine what was on their thank you card to Jesus.

There was one family in particular, the Hesse family, that was there. Many of you all know Bret and Mary Margaret and Cal and Ty Hesse. Cal was at CHKD fighting leukemia for six months and is now home and is growing hair and he and his family were there on Wednesday night. When I saw them put their thank you card to Jesus in I melted. I melted. What an amazing gift to be able to pray with each other and to support each other and to celebrate and give thanks with each other on such a meaningful holiday in our nation. Amazing. I learned all over again on that evening that when one gives thanks, it really does melt your heart away. It does take the stiffness out of life and the hardness out of your heart and allows you to experience the grace of Christ.

It’s not always that easy is it? It’s not always that easy when we are carrying around that stiffness in our lives or that hardness in our hearts. It comes really quickly sometimes. Back in September on Abigail’s birthday I was at the mall, ran in to get a card at Hallmark store, and I was running back out. Not running, I was in my car, I was driving back out. I wasn’t going really fast but someone turned, I guess didn’t see me, and ran into my car. I was in just a little fender-bender

accident. The air bags didn't go off; it was nothing serious – just a little dent in my bumper. Just a real pain to be in an accident on your daughter's birthday, but everything was fine. I jumped out of the car and I ran over to her car and she was fine; we exchanged insurance information and then I went on my way. I thought, "That interruption wasn't too bad." But after a while, the next couple of days, all of a sudden my back started hurting and my shoulder was getting all cramped up and my neck was getting all tight. I realized that and I went to see my chiropractor and he said, "Well, Valena, when you're in accident like this sometimes your body takes in more of the impact than the car does. A car is designed to take in great impact, but when it is just a little bit of impact it lets you have some of it too. So, for the last two months I've been going to the chiropractor three times a week to get all straightened back out again, so I'm finally feeling myself, my wiggly self again.

When sin impacts our lives getting the stiffness out and the hardness of heart out doesn't always happen all at once. When someone attacks your child, their soccer playing ability, or a parent abuses you when you are a child, or when a friend betrays you, the hardness that's left on your life can be very difficult to deal with, very difficult to deal with. That's what Jeremiah and Paul are talking about today. Not only does the Lord not remember sin, but He calls us to do the same thing. He calls us to not remember sin anymore in our own lives because when you remember sin you just get all stiff and our heart gets really hard, and you know that hardness and that stiffness is there for protection and I understand that. It's not something that you want to let go of easily, it's something that needs to be worked out, to be massaged out, to be adjusted out of your life and you can't do it by yourself. That's what Paul is talking about in this whole explanation of his ministry. He's basically saying, "This is not me. This is not me. This is the Lord's work and what He has done is He's taken the veil away. He's given us freedom to be with Him in glory, to see Him face to face, to know His mercy and His love and His forgiveness, and we are to live that out in our own lives." But, it's so very difficult.

The most wonderful illustration that I can give to you is a woman that I've talked about *ad nauseum* before, so I'm sorry if you've heard me talk about Corrie ten Boom², but she is an amazing Christian woman. She lived during World War II, lived in Holland. She and her sister Betsy and her father housed and protected and hid Jewish folks in their home during the Holocaust and saved many, many lives in doing so. Unfortunately, they were eventually found out and they were all three sent to prison. Her father died in prison. She and her sister Betsy were actually sent to Ravensbruck Concentration Camp and Betsy actually died in Ravensbruck. Corrie, through a clerical error because of her age – she was in her forties by the time the war was over – but because of a clerical error she was released from the concentration camp and her life was spared. From the moment that she walked out of Ravensbruck she began to talk about the forgiveness of Jesus Christ and how important it is in community and moving forward.

She tells the story about going to Germany, defeated Germany, after the war was over and meeting a guard who was at Ravensbruck and this is what she says:

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with a message that God forgives and that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat and the next a blue uniform and a visor cap with its skull and cross bones. It came back with a rush. The huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. The place was Ravensbruck and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard, one of the most cruel guards. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out, "A fine message, fraulein. How good it is to know that as you say all our

sins are at the bottom of the sea,” and I who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me of course. How could he remember one prisoner among thousands of women, but I remember him. I was face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze. “You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he was saying. “I was a guard there.” No, he did not remember me. “But since that time” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, fraulein.” Again, the hand came out. “Will you forgive me?” It could not have been many seconds that he stood there hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrested with the most difficult thing I ever had to do. I had to do it – I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition that we forgive those who have injured us, and so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me, and as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands, and then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. “I forgive you, brother,” I cried, “with my whole heart.” For a long moment we grasped each others’ hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.

“I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more,” says the Lord and Paul says, “With unveiled faces we will see the Lord face to face. We will experience His glory.”

I’m reminded of Tim Shrewsbury and of his faithful witness until his death just a few weeks ago. I’m reminded of going to the hospital before his surgeries. For the first surgery he couldn’t talk because of the pressure on his brain, but the second one I remember a group of us from the church staff going to see him and he was sitting outside with Judy and with Meredith and with other members of his family, and he of course asked for us to pray for him, but before we prayed, he said, “Now, Valena, you know me.” Believe me, I knew Tim – all of his stubbornness and all of his loveliness. He said, “What I really want more than anything is for whatever happens that God will be glorified.” What a powerful thing to say before brain surgery, what a powerful word of forgiveness not only for himself, but also in a way forgiving God for giving him a brain tumor, for being so open that no matter what happened he knew that God would be glorified, that he was only a vessel for a greater glory to come. There are so many in our church family that have such a faith and for those of us that it’s harder, for those of us who still have a hardness of heart, or still have stiffness in our neck because we would rather turn to the sin instead of turn away and turn to Christ, I encourage you to hear the stories, to hear the stories of forgiveness, to read the Scriptures and to know that we have a God that has a divine memory that doesn’t remember sin. He doesn’t remember and so no matter where else in your life there is hardness, you can always turn to Him. You can always turn to Him with thanksgiving and with praise and He will take care of the rest. That’s the power of our God.

Thanks be to Him. Amen.

Sermon Dictionary Notes:

¹ Squanto – a Patuxet Native American Indian, as well as a former British slave, who assisted the Pilgrims after their first winter in the New World. Squanto helped the Europeans despite having been kidnapped and enslaved in Europe before returning to America to find that his entire tribe had been wiped out by a plague.

² Boom, Corrie ten – Dutch woman whose family hid Jews in their home in Holland during World War II; story is recorded in her book *The Hiding Place*.