Sunday, January 13, 1991
DISCOVERING GOD'S SPIRITUAL GIFTS (No. 1 in a Series: The Gift of Grace)
Mark 1:4-11

Do you sometimes find yourself trying very hard to believe in God, while at the same time there are all kinds of voices inside you telling you to stop believing? If so, this new sermon series, which I am beginning today, is especially for you.

Believing does not always come easy. It never has, and maybe it never will. Here's why: Deep down, we want to believe in God, and we almost always do. But then there are the problems and pains that we see every day, and they tell us that believing in a good God doesn't make much sense.

There are so many people we care about who hurt so much. People get cancer and die too soon. We hear about parents who abuse their children, and it makes no sense. Last week, while in another city for a minister's meeting, I read about a mother who has been indicted for killing all five of her children, one by one, before each one had its fifth birthday. During those years, many people had suspicions, but no one took any action.

We know we make many of our own miseries. We also know there is no adequate rational explanation for much of the evil and suffering in the world.

What we all want to discover and experience is "deep-down" believing. We want to discover and experience the Spirit and power of God in our lives. I can think of arguments for the existence of God in my sleep. But I am talking about the kind of believing that lets you know in the deep places of your soul that it is all right, even when your head tells you that there's a lot that is wrong.

For example, when I can feel that I am loved while everything all around me says I am unlovable, then I am believing, really believing. Then I am experiencing the Spirit of God within me. When I feel gratitude enough to make me glad, then I am believing. When I feel that all is right with me, even when everything around me is the pits, then I am actually believing. Then I have discovered God's Spirit working in me.

It is the testimony of our Christian faith that the Spirit of God takes hold of us and can be experienced in bad times as in good, in sorrow as in joy. Thus, in this sermon series, we are going to be discovering some of God's spiritual gifts and how those gifts are at work in our lives and in the lives of others.

Notice especially that I am using the word "discovery," not achievement. We are not talking about "trying harder." In discovering God's spiritual gifts, many times it's a matter of knowing where to look for them and then being open to receiving them.

Once upon a time, there lived in Cracow, Poland, a Rabbi named Eisik, who dreamed three times that there was a treasure buried beneath a particular bridge in the City of Prague.

After the third dream, Eisik finally walked the long distance to Prague. When he found the bridge, the captain of the soldiers who were guarding the bridge asked him why he had come. Eisik told him of his three dreams. The captain replied that if he had faith in dreams, he would

have gone to Cracow a long time ago when he dreamed that there was a treasure buried in the ground under the stove of a Jew named Eisik.

When Rabbi Eisik heard this, he left immediately, walked the long journey home, and dug up the treasure underneath his kitchen stove.

This story, which dates back to the 8th century, is about all of us. We tend to think the treasure we've been looking for is somewhere else, when all the time it is under the kitchen stove at home.

The greatest treasure we can find in life is God and the spiritual gifts that come from God. There are people who look all over the world in exotic places and strange religious movements, but at the same time, they frequently miss the gifts of God at home in their own everyday lives and ordinary commonplace experiences. Remember, Jesus said, "The Spirit of God is in the midst of you or within you and among you." The Apostle Paul said, "God is not far from any one of us, for in God we live and move and have our being."

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas, which reminds us each year that we discover God in the commonplace. The shepherds and the Wise Men found God in a baby in a manger.

Now let's look more specifically at the spiritual gift of God's grace and where we can discover it at work in our lives, in the lives of others, and in the world at large.

First of all, what is this gift of grace? How can it be described? Grace is God's assurance that life can be all right, even when everything in it seems all wrong. In Jesus, we see the gift of God's grace expressed fully in a human being who lived among us. Jesus discovered the gift of God's grace in his life at a number of different points. We experience God's grace when we feel God's affirmation of us. For example, after the baptism of Jesus by John, he heard and felt God's affirmation, "You are my son, the beloved; with you, I am well pleased." Any time we feel affirmed by God, we are discovering anew the gift of grace. Frequently, God's affirmation of us comes through another person.

I am not talking here about some kind of magic that automatically makes everything right. What the gift of God's grace does is to show us that it is right for us to live, that life is a blessing, that it is truly good, wonderful even, for us to be breathing and feeling at the same time that everything clustering around us is not good.

To put it another way, the gift of God's grace does not cure all our cancers, transform all our children into winners, or send us all soaring into success. Grace is rather an amazing power to look earthy reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, life's unfairness, and yet feel and know in our deepest being that it is good and right for us to be alive in God's creation. This is why we call it "amazing grace."

It will help us to understand and to more fully discover the gift of grace in our lives if we look at three different sides to grace.

First of all, grace is pardon. We experience and discover the gift of God's grace whenever we come to know that it is all right with us personally, that we are okay, even though we know that a lot of things are wrong with us. In other words, even though our lives do not nearly always match our dreams, God loves and accepts us. That's the gift of grace.

Unfortunately, there are some expressions of religion that do not help us to discover this gift. Anytime that a religion clobbers you for your failures and sends you away groveling in your defeat, it has not helped you discover the gift of God's grace.

Not long ago, I spoke with a woman who had recently come hurting and shamed through a divorce and felt condemned by a religion without grace. She said, "I know I will never be able to forgive myself." I tried my best to help her understand that God does not condemn us for our mistakes; that God always forgives us even before we ask. She needed to discover the gift of God's grace, and she did, and it changed her.

This leads directly to the second side of grace. Grace is the power to lead you closer to God's image, which is already in you, and to make you a better person than you were yesterday. Grace does not make us better people by bullying us into moral improvement.

When you are freed by pardoning grace, then that same power begins to work to make you right. The moment we know it's all right, even though we were terribly in the wrong, we are freed from our private burden of failures and given the power to become the sort of person God wants us to be and the sort of person we want to be. The straitjacket of self-hatred is off; the shackles of self-judgment are ripped away; God's power is set loose within us, and we are on the way to becoming the person we are meant to be.

The third side of God's gift of grace is promise. God's gift of grace is the power to live now as if things are going to be all right tomorrow.

There are many people who desperately need the power to live by promise. I meet people all the time who tell me they have the feeling that they are locked in a car going full steam down a steep hill — with the steering wheel locked and no brakes.

Or I meet people that one man described recently as "cliff people." Their lives are lived in fear as if they are on a small ledge halfway up a steep cliff, and they are afraid to move. They are hanging onto the side of the cliff with their fingernails. Such people need a promise that tomorrow will be better than today.

To people like these and to every one of you who has lost touch with God's good intentions for your future, you can have the gift of God's grace — it's there waiting. All you need to do is to accept it.

God's gift of grace is amazing because it works against the grain of common sense. Grace promises that you can trust God to have a better tomorrow for you than the day you have made for yourself.

We would make a mistake, of course, if we expected everything to happen at once, instantly, fully formed. It may come in fragments — a nudge of power here, a ray of hope there. It may happen in one sector of your life at a time; do not look for the whole story to be told in one chapter. You may have it and lose it and need to get it all over again. But God gives you the gift of grace, you can be sure of that. All you need is to be open to it and to accept it. God says to each one of us, as God said to Jesus, "You are my child, my beloved; with you, I am well pleased." Amen.