

It was my 10th birthday, and my folks invited my friends from school and the neighborhood. My mom even made us a piñata filled with all kinds of tooth-decaying agents – which were like gold to us kids. Being the birthday boy, I figured I would be gracious and let some of the other kids take a whack at it first. Then I would whale on the thing to blast open the treasure trove of candy. Little did I know that one of my 10-year-old guests had turned traitor and was already plotting a coup. And when I dove for the candy spilling from the broken piñata, my nemesis jumped on top of me while his little minion sister grabbed up the candy that was rightfully mine. And yes, I actually cried.

The scales of justice had been shattered. My world was falling apart. And what made the whole thing so painful, besides that 170-pound 10-year-old, was that I expected my parents to fight for me. They were supposed to get my candy back and to bounce those trouble-makers. They didn’t deserve it; *I* did. It was *my* birthday! But for some reason, they just laughed like it was the funniest thing since my dad slipped on the roof and ended up hanging from the gutter.

Looking back on my childhood, filled with all kinds of fond and frustrating incidents like that, here is one thing I’ve learned. Even if your family or childhood hasn’t been perfect, God always intends the greatest blessings for you through those people and experiences. We’ve all got certain memories that can remind us of how good God has always been to us, even if it didn’t seem like it at the time. And in view of all the other blessings he’s given you throughout your life, do you ever wonder, “*Why me? Why has God been so good to me?*”

From the standpoint of a believer, I think the answer is quite obvious: God’s grace. That means every good thing that I have and am is a result of God’s undeserved love. I didn’t earn his forgiveness or choose to be his child. By nature I would have resisted and turned away from God’s gift of faith to follow my own self-destructing path. But God brought me into his family, “*so that I could be his own and live under him in his kingdom...*” Because of God’s undeserved love in Christ Jesus, we are members of God’s kingdom and family.

We stand in amazement and wonder at his love. Especially during this season of Lent when we watch our Savior suffering and dying for us, the Holy Spirit zeroes our focus in on these questions, “*Why me? Why would Jesus suffer like that for me, to make me a part of his family?*” You know why. But at some point in the thought process, you realize that not everyone is a part of God’s family. Some don’t want in, because it’s too hard to give up all those things that the sinful nature wants. They don’t in, because it’s too much of a gamble to believe in something you can’t even see. “*But I can see and make sense of what I do myself!*” Some have rejected him outright and never get to see how good this life with Jesus can be. Others have severed their ties with God and his family, because they no longer remember or care about why God would suffer and die the way Jesus did.

But we stand in amazement and wonder at his love. “*Maybe those other hard-headed, earthly-minded folks don’t care, but we do, right?*” Yes, we do, but it doesn’t mean we can’t be hard-headed and earthly-minded, too, does it? But have you ever wondered why some reject Christ? Even from a logical standpoint, some say, it would make more sense to bet on Jesus than to bet against him. I’m sure you’ve heard this argument before, “*If you believe in Jesus and you’re wrong, then nothing happens when you die. But if you reject him and you’re wrong, then you don’t want to know what will happen when you die.*” But you know what, I’ve never talked to or heard of anyone who said they believe in Jesus because, “*well, it made more sense,*” or, “*the odds were better.*” That’s not why you believe. The gospel goes against our human way of thinking and believing, but the Holy Spirit worked that faith to believe the impossible, to join you to God’s family.

A popular advertisement stated, “*Membership has its privileges.*” As believers we can definitely see the advantages of being part of God’s family. The Apostle Paul referred to those ‘advantages’ as “*...the nourishing sap*” of God’s family tree. Through faith in Christ, we receive the nourishing sap of God’s love and forgiveness in the word and sacraments. We continue believing against the odds. We live with obedience to God rather than to our selfish sinful natures. The root of the gospel – God’s love in Christ – directs our hearts, minds and lives to the eternal home that he’s prepared for each of us in heaven. Membership in God’s family tree definitely has its privileges!

But even though we may understand what these wonderful privileges are, we have to constantly be reminded why we have them. Sure we can say, “*Because I’m a member of God’s family,*” and that’s true. Or is it necessary to also say, “*Because I’m a member of God’s family through faith and by God’s grace?*” And no doubt, that’s probably what we mean and assume when we talk about our membership in God’s family. “*Of course it’s by grace and through faith in Christ.*”

I'd like to believe that our church body, the WELS, will forever remain faithful to God's Word, to always believe and profess our Christian faith according to the entire counsel of Holy Scripture. Next Sunday our 8th grade confirmands will stand before God's altar to promise loyalty to his Word. Next month we anticipate even more adult confirmands to do the same, expressing their unity in faith with the members of this congregation and with our entire synod, the WELS. And that's a wonderful gift we'll celebrate together. But I hope that no one would assume that our church membership here grants us automatic access at the heavenly gates.

When you read the words of the Apostle Paul in our text, you can almost hear the angst in his voice. He recounts the sordid tale of his own people who indeed were members of God's family for a time. They were his chosen people, his special family of believers, for about 2,000 years. And to all those children of Abraham who believed in God's promised Savior still to come, God also credited with righteousness. To be clear, God credited them with righteousness not because they were Israelites by birth, but because they were his children by faith.

But many of them misunderstood. Being part of God's family was no longer a privilege afforded them through faith. Rather it became an entitlement they deserved because, well, they were Israelites by birth. Many of the religious leaders encouraged this understanding of their relationship with God, that they were automatically part of his family by blood – not Christ's blood, but their own. They had stumbled as Paul said (v. 11), and instead of putting their faith in Jesus, they put their faith in their own obedience. They had such a high opinion of their blood and their obedience that they lost sight of God's love.

Oh, but that would never happen to us. We learn from the mistakes of others, including those we read about in Scripture. I mean, what was with those people? Who in their right mind would assume that they could be part of God's family tree and receive all those benefits and blessings because of their own works or ancestry? *"Tsk. How could they be so foolish? They broke themselves off from God's family tree like that."*

But wait a second, the Apostle Paul says, ***"¹⁷ If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ¹⁸ do not boast over those branches...*** He's speaking to Gentiles – to us! Israel was God's chosen nation, his people, the original branches of his family tree. But, ***"²⁰ ...they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either."***

By nature we are sinful and selfish people. We still have a way of taking God's gracious blessing – that he grafted us into his family tree through faith and by grace – and twist it into something to glorify ourselves. We might not say it out loud, but the sinful nature still thinks, *"Hey, compared to others I'm pretty careful about praying and hearing God's word and receiving the sacrament regularly. I'm relatively self-controlled and don't keep grudges. I set my priorities well and for the most part make God-pleasing choices."* And so easily and smoothly we let our focus shift from God's gracious power to our own obedience and deliberate choices. And eventually the whole habit of daily repentance seems to apply less and less to me. *"Maybe every other day or so is good enough?"*

Yes, we can make good or bad choices as Christians. Sometimes I think we tend to think that the season of Lent is about what we give up for God, and we end up thinking that our self-sacrificing makes us somehow more appealing to our heavenly Father. But the truth is, it's not about what we give up or about our sacrifices. Rather, it's about what God has given and sacrificed for us. We see our Lord Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha, the way he strains and bleeds under the weight of the cross. And the closer we look, the more deeply we peer into Jesus' heart, we see how gladly and willingly he carries it. And it certainly isn't because he knew what wonderful, grateful people we would be. No, Jesus did this knowing how disgusting and ungrateful people would be toward him – including us. But he loved you so much that was willing to give up these agonizing moments of his life here on earth, to endure the shame of the cross and the wrath of his Father for our sins. By his wounds, we are healed. We are forgiven. We have peace with God.

It's always been God's grace in Christ Jesus. Through the gospel in Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit has grafted us into God's family tree. Through faith we share in the nourishing sap of God's love and forgiveness. His love is unconditional and impartial – it's for all people, even for sinners like us! May his Spirit move us to sober reflection over our unworthiness and need to repent everyday. Looking to Jesus' cross, the picture and proof of God's true love and power for sinners, we will live our lives with a spirit of humble gratitude and joyful confidence in the perfect, world-reconciling salvation of Christ. Let the richness of his mercy inspire in you the desire and dedication to share it with all those around you. Amen.