

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus taught us, in last week's Gospel, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent*" (John 6:29). Faith is God's work; believing in Jesus, sent from the Father's side down to earth as our Savior, is a Divine act of grace. And it is by this grace that we are saved, as St. Paul says, through faith, not by our works.

And yet, a term was used by 20th century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*: "cheap grace." I'm not sure if Bonhoeffer coined the term, but he defined it this way: "Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before. 'All for sin could not atone.' The world goes on in the same old way, and we are still sinners 'even in the best life' as Luther said. Well, then, let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world's standards in every sphere of life, and not presumptuously aspire to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin" (p. 46).

Cheap grace? Live like the rest of the world and not a different life? That's not at all the way Paul speaks in our Epistle, a mere two chapters separated from his great confession on grace. Quite the contrary, Paul says: "*you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.*" Those ways of darkness and corruption and deceit belong "*to your former manner of life,*" he says. Christians are to walk as those who have been recreated by God's grace "*after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness,*" "*renewed in the spirit of [their] minds.*" We "*are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*" (Eph. 2:10).

"Cheap grace," Bonhoeffer continued, "is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate" (p. 47). We know that this is a counterfeit grace. The grace of God, His good favor toward us, cost Him much, that He might be both just and the justifier (Rom. 3:26), and so Bonhoeffer calls it costly. "Above all, it is *costly*," he wrote, "because it cost God the life of his Son: 'ye were bought at a price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God" (p. 48).

"Such grace is *costly*," he says, "because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life" (p. 47). Jesus uses different words in the Gospel, but they convey something similar — Divine, incarnational,

sacrificial, gracious: *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*

These words and this part of Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse call us to this discipleship, for Jesus introduces another thought to the work of God in this text. Besides faith — that *“you believe in him whom [God] has sent”* — Jesus presents the idea of “coming to Him”: *“whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst,”* Jesus says (v. 35); *“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out”* (v. 37); *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him”* (v. 44); *“Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me”* (v. 45); *“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father”* (v. 65).

Now, it’s pretty clear that “coming” to Jesus and “believing” in Him are closely connected. But are they synonymous? Bill Weinrich thinks not: “these two statements [“coming” and “believing”] are not merely synonymous in meaning,” he says (*Concordia Commentary: John 1:1–7:1*, 686). “The first statement is one of following and discipleship The second statement is one of that personal commitment and trust which characterizes the disciple of Jesus” (p. 686). Weinrich quotes another commentator who supports this view: “One can only receive this bread when one comes to Jesus and believes on him. ... Both occur together as one. Faith is a movement toward Jesus and remains such in discipleship (Wilckens, *Johannes*, 102, footnote quoted in Weinrich, 686).

These two notions, while not synonyms, are closely connected. Weinrich writes: “Faith, then, seeks and finds an adherence to Jesus and is faith only in that adherence” (p. 686). Indeed, they expose the lie that people often tell, deceiving themselves: that they can believe in Jesus, yet fail in discipleship’s call to come to Him, *“neglecting to meet together”* (Heb. 10:25) and so depriving themselves not only of Christ’s life-giving words of forgiveness and salvation and the life-sustaining bread of life that promises everlasting life, but also of Christ’s encouragement that stirs us up *“to love and good works”* (Heb. 10:24). Whatever that person, who absents himself from the body of Christ, has, one cannot call it faith, for he is not coming to Jesus and following Him. That person is no disciple.

At the same time,” Weinrich continues, “only that adherence which is of faith is true and salvific.” That is, neither is the mere “going through the motions” of Christianity sufficient for salvation. You can be at church constantly doing things, and yet, if you do not have faith, you will perish utterly.

This played out at the time of the Reformation. Confessor Philip Melancthon in the Apology exposed this faithless way of receiving the Sacrament. “[Our] adversaries contend that the Mass is a work that justifies us by the outward work (*ex opere operato* [apart from faith]) and removes the guilt and liability to punishment in those for whom it is celebrated” (Apology, IV, 210). But they err, for without faith, the Sacrament is not eaten for our good, but to our judgment.

Our “coming” and our “believing” may not be the same thing, but we as Lutheran Christians know the close connection between them. Jesus tells us that we come to Him because the Father draws us, and we know our heavenly Father does this as He “gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity” (Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, Second Petition). Again, these two are distinct but connected as Luther again teaches in his Small Catechism: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him” (Third Article of the Creed).

Indeed, the Father draws us by His Spirit through the external word — He “has called me by the Gospel.” Luther comments in a Sermon on John 6 — it’s there in your insert: “When God draws us, He is not like a hangman, who drags a thief up the ladder to the gallows; but He allures and coaxes us in a friendly fashion, as a kind man attracts people by his amiability and cordiality, and everyone willingly goes to him. Thus God, too, gently draws people to Himself, so that they abide with Him willingly and happily” (*Luther’s Works*, 23:86).

God the Father draws us and we come to Christ when we “hear that God is not hostile to [us], but is [our] gracious and merciful Father, who gave His Son for [us], let Him die for [us], and raised Him again from the dead. He directs [us] to the Son and has Him proclaimed to [us]” that we may come to Him, and in coming to Him and believing in Him, that we may know the truth and be set free, that we may know the truth and find ourselves also on the way to the Father and to everlasting life.

Through the Son, God gives us yet more — Holy Sacraments of which to partake: water to wash us clean, bread and wine that carry Christ’s own body and blood — the Bread of Life — to our lips. Thus, we are here today, as true disciples, coming at Christ’s own beckoning to His table to partake of His priceless grace, coming to eat the living bread from heaven for our life, coming to be strengthened in our faith in God and our love for one another, coming that we may not hunger any more, believing that we may not thirst any more.

Therefore, come. Take. Eat. Believe. And ready yourselves for the unending feast of heaven.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.