

*As we approach our First 70 Celebration on Sunday, November 13, please remember that we will have only ONE service on that Sunday at 10:00 AM at the Church. A lunch and program will follow. Join us as we celebrate 70 years of God's grace in this blessed corner of God's creation, and help us to recommit ourselves to being God's hands in the world for 70 more. The following is an expansion of some thoughts offered in the recent newsletter. . .*

Seventy is an interesting number in the world of religion. In certain ancient traditions, the idea of seven was a sign of perfection. Thus, seven times ten—70—is perfection multiplied.

There is also the reference in the gospels where Jesus is asked about how often one should forgive someone who has wronged them. Seventy times? Or Seventy times seven? (Clearly, either one would challenge our understanding of what is fair and just, and, perhaps, that is part of what Jesus is up to in his teaching and in his ministry: he not only pushes our personal sensibilities regarding forgiveness; he also shatters the expectations that people have held throughout the ages regarding the mercy of God. Rather than a curmudgeonly bean counting task master, the God Jesus often portrays is one possessing infinite patience, mercy, and grace. I often wonder what the world would look like if we practiced even a smidgen of this type of compassion? To twist the words of one writer, "Grace is not cheap; it's free."

Which seems to be at the heart of my favorite reference to seventy within the realm of religion (the freeness of Grace). The teaching comes from the Greek Orthodox tradition. In response to the question, "How many sacraments are there?" the Greek Orthodox tradition possesses a response: 70. A sacrament is a physical element that expresses to us the love, mercy, and grace of God. The obvious sacraments to us are Baptism and Eucharist. Water, Bread, and Wine are the vehicles through which we acknowledge God's love for us. In the Greek tradition, there are not actually 70 sacraments. Rather, the number expresses the infinite reality of sacraments. Indeed, the whole of creation exists as a sacrament; it is a sign to us of God's love, mercy, and grace, and the myriad expressions that are a part of creation offer us continual glimpses into the free reality and the freeing reality of the grace that surrounds us.

Of course, the creation can also be a scary place, and we may see pain, suffering and capriciousness rather than love, mercy, and grace. The irony, or should I say paradox, is that often the same experience or reality may hold these two seemingly irreconcilable ends of the continuum in tension. Within the Christian tradition, the cross is, perhaps, the most poignant expression of this. In what is one of the most heinous and cruel expressions of torture, there is also a hope and trust that an amazing grace is transforming even the instrument of death into an image that promotes God's love. This is never to say that we neatly explain away suffering and pain. Hardly. I believe that the incarnation is the fullest expression of God's solidarity with us precisely in the difficulties of our humanness, not to rid us of them but to let us know that we are never alone.

As I reflect on the pervasiveness of what some would call a sacramental theology and the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of life together at St. Francis, I like to think that the community here embodies the sacramental reality that the Greek Orthodox tradition recognizes. For 70 years, the people who have shared ministry here have, at times, literally been sacraments to each other and the world, reminders that God's love continues. There certainly are fallible human hands that have shared

in this ministry along the way, and, as we observe All Saints' Sunday this Sunday, we are reminded of our paradoxical ontology: *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously saint *and* sinner). And, yet, the beauty of this recognition is that we are not super-human or better than any other. We are the children of God, called by God in this place for work in God's creation on behalf of God's other creatures. At times we get this role so very right. At others, we fall a bit short. Always we are reminded that it is not because we are good that God loves us. Rather, God already loves us, thus we are freed to be good. As we give thanks for 70 years, may we look forward to 70 more. And as we do, may we recognize in each other and in ourselves the opportunity to bear God's love, mercy, and grace for the world sore in need of it.