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Grace: Paying it forward.

We're here today to celebrate the arrival of Jesus on earth, and so we might wonder why Jesus was born here. The answer is simple, and it is given in the Gospel of John, Chapter 1, verse 17: *the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*. Simply put, God created a Covenant with the Israelites, one based on obeying laws and receiving three things in return: 1., God's grace, 2., progeny or offspring, and 3., land to live on. For us, though, Jesus brought a New Covenant, one based on God's unearned grace. We don't have to do anything to receive this grace; there are no specific rules to follow. But what is grace? And why did God want us to receive this grace, that is delivered to us via Jesus in the New Covenant?

Grace is first of all, entirely unearned. It is given freely. It is the most important concept in the New Testament. Grace, simply put, is mercy. It is what allows us to be regenerated spiritually no matter what we have done. It is what sanctifies us and allows us to heal - and then live the way that Jesus Christ taught us: with forgiveness, care for those in need, and empathy for those who are

suffering. That's why we're here today, to celebrate this astonishing change in our relationship with God, from an old, legal-based covenant to a new one that is rooted entirely in freely given grace.

What should our response to grace be? Ever heard the phrase "paying it forward"? This refers to our tendency to offer someone else an act of kindness after someone shows kindness to us. It's an alternative to just saying thanks. It's based on the assumption that the motivation that we have for being good to another person isn't a selfish one. It's not to receive something tangible in return, like a big, gracious thanks. Our real desire is to change that person by making their life in better – perhaps in a small way - and also to make them want to be good to others.

When I was a kid, my grammar school had a cafeteria. You could eat for thirty cents, and that was a meaningful amount of money back then, given that lunch cost thirty cents every day. My favorite meal at school was spaghetti, not because of the spaghetti itself, but because of the free butter that my school got from the government. You see, the government, working with dairies, gave a lot of butter to the school, and they had to find a way to use it. So, there was no way to get a piece of bread without having it pre-slathered with a thick layer of butter.

We would get a plate of spaghetti, two slices of bread, and then put it all together to make spaghetti and butter sandwiches. They were great.

But not every kid had a family that could afford the thirty cents every day. So, there was a program at my school. When a parent came in to pay for their kid's lunches once a month, they could choose to also pay for a month's worth of lunches for some other, unnamed kid. Then, when a child went through the line, and the teacher – who was usually a Catholic sister – at the cash register knew that the kid's family didn't have much money, the cashier would just quietly nod the child through without paying. The parents who paid for other parents' kids to eat were paying it forward: they had been blessed in life and they knew it. Instead of just saying thanks to God, they did something for a unnamed child, and then did it anonymously.

I had a close buddy who always got free lunches this way. He and his family had no idea who paid for his food. My friend also got something more than just nutrition. He got a lot of joy out of these free lunches. We would sit at the picnic tables – which were typically coated in seagull crap, as this was near the ocean in southern California – and eat our spaghetti and butter sandwiches – and laugh. Why did some parents choose to pay for an extra kid to eat? Why did they feel motivated to pay it forward? It was their response to grace. God does not want a

thank you email or text. *I really appreciate all the grace, God, tell your kid Jesus thanks for giving it to us and I hope all is well in Heaven.* No, God wants us to be changed by receiving grace. We express that change by passing it on.

One day, when spaghetti was on the menu, we noticed that the slices of bread had an unusually and extremely thick layer of butter on them. It was about a quarter of an inch thick. I asked the sister who was passing the food out why there was so much butter on the bread. She said that they weren't using it quickly enough, and if they didn't use it all, the government, which subsidized the production of butter, would give the school less. Makes sense. Why would we want to get less of a free thing? But grace is like that. God subsidizes the creation of grace like you wouldn't believe. That day, we had particularly fantastic spaghetti and butter sandwiches. And any time we want, we here, today, can have a particularly fantastic helping of grace. You don't need to say thanks. Just take all you can handle – and then pay it forward. Remember to pay it forward.

Please pray with me. *God, we are pleased to welcome Jesus into our lives, as a baby, a teacher of how to live on this planet, and as the bringer of grace. Thank you for letting us celebrate together. Thank you for the support that we have from all our fellow faithful here tonight. And please guide us to find a never-ending stream of ways to pay it forward. Amen.*