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**Epiphany 7 A – Transfiguration - Feb. 19, 2023**

**“The NFL of Grace”**

**Read: Matthew 17: 1 - 9/ Memorize: Matthew 17: 6 - 7**

I know that some of you may already be having withdrawal symptoms. So, I thought I would surprise you with an NFL sermon this weekend. Here’s a warm up for you. I was a little reluctant to tell this one. It sounds too outlandish. Then when I Googled it, I found the story on the website for Lutheran Hour Ministries, a very reputable organization. So here it goes.

The Chicago Bears were losing the game at halftime. When they went into the locker room their coach, Mike Ditka, wanted to encourage them. To graphically illustrate his point about being tough and tenacious, Mike put his hand into a bucket. Pulling it out, the team saw a snapping turtle had clamped securely to it.

Ditka continued to lecture his astounded team. He assured his team that any one of them could do the same thing this if they were really committed and determined. He asked for a volunteer. After an extended period of silence, William “The Fridge” Perry stepped forward and volunteered.

Ditka thanked him for his courage and said he would get the turtle off his hand. The “Fridge” politely said there was no need to remove the turtle, “Just stick out your other hand, and I’ll bite that one instead!”

Did you watch the game last Sunday? Forgive me, those of you who are not football fans. Perhaps you preferred the commercials? At halftime, the coaches normally give their teams encouragement. That’s how I saw this event on the mount of Transfiguration.

Think about it this way, the head coach, God, shows up with a couple of the most famous players in history to affirm and inspire. In the lives of the disciples; in Jesus’ life, we see the grace of God at work. You’ll see it all work out in the NFL of Grace. Now, if you were thinking I was going to talk about the National Football League, I apologize that I wasn’t clearer.

On the other hand, how can we ignore something that, depending on who you read, said between 100 - 200 million people saw the game. So again, for those of you who would wonder why I would possibly talk about it, here’s my point. If I can get some small

segment of that audience to listen to a sermon, I'll be really pleased. So, what's the NFL of grace? In this case, NFL stands for Nudging, Forgiving and Leading Grace of God.

The nudging grace of God can work in people's lives, even before they acknowledge Him. It is God knowing their name and calling them to get their attention. It is God wooing them with love songs; whispering their name and showing them His great love. That's the grace Jesus used, as He invited people to follow him. He nudged them into it.

Bobby Dodd, the former great football coach of Georgia Tech, tells the story of a game in which his team was leading 7 – 6 with just one minute to go. He instructed his quarterback not to pass the ball under any conditions.

The Bulldogs were near the fifteen-yard line. As the quarterback began to execute the next play, with just fifteen seconds on the clock, he just couldn't resist throwing it. The pass was intercepted. The interceptor rushed toward the Georgia Tech goal line. The entire team gave chase, but all gave up except for the quarterback. He continued to chase his opponent and somehow, tackled him. The ball was fumbled and the quarterback recovered it. Georgia Tech won the game 7 – 6.

After the game, the losing coach said to Coach Dodd, "I will never understand how that quarterback was able to do what he did." Dodd said, "Well, it's actually quite simple – your boy was running for a touchdown; my boy was running for his life." That young man was hearing the nudging voice of Coach Dodd in his head.

The nudging grace of God works both in those who know Him and those who don't. It is that kind of grace that moves people to make a donation or do something to help others, like those in disasters in Turkey and Syria. Just as God is continually nudging us along in our relationship with Him, we can be part of God's nudging grace to others.

The "F" is for the forgiving grace of God. This is the grace we are most familiar with. God nudges us toward a loving relationship with Him through Jesus. By that relationship He offers us forgiveness. Once we accept God's love through Jesus, it becomes real in our lives.

Jesus becomes our friend, our Savior, our companion and our Lord, not just a name that we know. Through that forgiving grace, we are justified and brought into a right relationship with God. When we are forgiven, the slate is wiped clean and we are justified.

Many years ago, Coach Joe Paterno and his team were playing for the national championship against Alabama in the Sugar Bowl. They probably would have won but they had a touchdown called back because there was a twelfth man on the field.

After the game, Paterno was asked to identify the young man: he responded, "It's only a game. I have no intention of ever identifying that boy. He just made a mistake." That's forgiving power. Because of God's forgiving grace, they will not be held against us.

It's that kind of forgiving grace that the disciples experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration. Remember that Peter wanted to stay up there to build a monument for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Then, when he hears God's voice, he is frightened, perhaps realizing that he has blown it. Yet, the next moment Jesus is tenderly touching him, as if offering him forgiveness and assuring him with these wonderful words, "Get up. Do not be afraid."

How easy it could have been for Paterno to subject this young man to condemnation. Jesus reminds us that we all have sinned and need that forgiveness. That's why He came, to live our life, die our death and rise to overcome death and sin, so that we could be sure of one thing: God will always forgive us when we turn to Him through faith in Jesus.

When our sin becomes known it often impacts our reputation. Jesus is God's way of getting rid of the bad reputation we might have picked up from the mistakes and poor decisions we have made in our lives by our sins. The nudging grace of God whispers God's love to us; the forgiving grace of God gives us a second change.

Now, the "L" stands for God's leading grace. It is leading us to become more and more like Jesus. That's what the disciples did. They had all failed, especially Peter, yet Jesus forgave them. Jesus even reaffirmed Peter's call to ministry. They were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and proclaimed the Good News throughout the world, becoming more like Jesus in their love for people over their lifetimes, as they served in Jesus' name.

It was a comical picture that caused the dad to burst into laughter. The rest of the family came running to see what caused the laughter. In the middle of the room, was the pro-football player's 7-year-old son. He was dressed in dad's pads and uniform.

He had tied the bottom of the pants and pulled the waistband under his arms. The jersey hung to his knees. The helmet looked like it had swallowed the boy's head. You could barely see his eyes peeking out. The boy's feet were lost in the father's size 11 shoes. But the little boy greeted his daddy with these wonderful words, "Look, Daddy, I want to be just like you!"

Jesus plans that we will be just like Him. That we might be as loving, kind, caring, forgiving, and God-centered as He was. As His followers that is also our greatest desire. The only way that happens is when we listen carefully, faithfully and obediently to God's Spirit, who is in us, to help us follow the leading grace of God.

**Vince Lombardi one of the greatest coaches in history wrote a book entitled *Run to Daylight*. His chapter on running backs describes how they learn all the plays, and then practice them over and over again until everything becomes practically automatic.**

**But Lombardi goes on to say that, “As the running back tucks the ball under his arm and begins his run, he has time to remember only one thing, to run to daylight. If the hole in the opposing player’s defense doesn’t open where you expect it, and you see daylight somewhere else, you run to daylight.” Jesus is the light of the world. The leading grace of God calls us to that light and enables us to make that run.**

**Tom Landry once said, “The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don’t want to do, in order to achieve what they’ve always wanted to be.” In a sense that’s what the NFL of God’s grace is seeking to do in us.**

**The Holy Spirit nudges us to do what we don’t want to do in order to become what we’ve always wanted to be. God’s forgiving grace sets us free to become His child. Then God leads us to become more and more like Jesus.**

**That’s the NFL, the nudging, forgiving and leading grace of God. Let the NFL work in you to create the life that God wants for you. Let God nudge you to experience the forgiveness He offers and lead you to become more and more like Jesus every day. Then you will realize the NFL of Grace God always intended for you through faith in Jesus.**

**Count me in: How will the NFL of Grace change your interactions with people?**