

**You Asked for It: What's So Amazing about Grace?
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 20:1-16**

Four years ago this summer, I preached a sermon about faith journeys, and how we take them. Part of the sermon was a dialog with a 9th grade young person who had just been confirmed at Fairmount. You probably know that part of the requirement of the class is that each young person prepares their personal faith statement: what they believe, and what they have “set their heart upon” at that point. This 14-year-old had participated enthusiastically throughout the year, yet when it came to writing his faith statement, he admitted he really wasn't sure what he believed. “I don't know that Jesus was actually the Son of God; most of the miracles can be explained through rational means. I guess I believe in God, but I also think religion is mainly something human beings invent to help them with life's problems.”

You and I respected his honest struggle with some of the questions we wonder about too. And I agree that a certain amount of religious belief and practice may well be the product of human intellect. But the thing is, the central, saving reality of Christian faith can't be explained that way. It just doesn't fit our notions of fairness, natural and logical consequences, or Divine imperatives. “It” is grace, and grace simply cuts against the grain of human expectation about balanced scales and appropriate reward for our labors. The member who requested this topic knows this, which is why he asked that we think about grace in reference to the universal experience of unfairness, of getting what we don't deserve, or not getting what we do deserve by virtue of our effort, goodwill, or spiritual maturity. What's so amazing about grace???

Our morning gospel text does not contain the word “grace,” and there's no biblical evidence Jesus ever uttered the word. Yet I know of no better biblical picture of it than the one Jesus gave us here in a parable, a story about some workers who were each paid a full-day's wage though some worked 12 hours, some 9, and some only 1 hour. You call that fair??? Often, grace is not so much amazing as it is downright annoying! Yet its very offense reveals its transforming power, and why grace constitutes the heart of the Christian faith. Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel of Matthew in the twentieth chapter, at the first verse.

[MATTHEW 20:1-16]

It's not fair! He got a bigger piece of cake than I did!

It's not fair! I've been a faithful employee for years—but they promoted that....person....for the position I deserved!

It's not fair! We've worked hard for what we've got; now these people come here expecting to have jobs handed to them, along with health care, education, the whole nine yards!

It's not fair! The Church should meet the needs of the members who contribute, who give their time, talent, and money. Where would we be without them?!

It's not fair! These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

If you have ever felt that life is unfair, this text is for you, which is to say, for every one of us, because none of us fails to notice that fact. Good fortune and misfortune visit people willy-nilly, regardless of whether they do good or evil. Life is unfair. Oh, we remind ourselves that of that, especially when comforting one another or ourselves in the face of disappointment, but part of us wishes it were. And I think it's this desire for balance between cause and effect that first ignites our sense of justice and injustice. What you sow is what you reap. Equal pay for equal work. All I want is my fair share of the pie.

Maybe that's why this story Jesus told is such a puzzle. The vineyard owner does not play fair. The workers all get exactly the same wage, despite the fact they don't work the same hours. Jesus told this story as a way of describing the kingdom of heaven, so it's hard not to conclude that God is the vineyard owner who doesn't play fair. God abandoned the merit system and rewards everyone equally, regardless of their personal effort and commitment. This is a parable of God's grace, that unconditional love and mercy God demonstrates to undeserving people.

. . . Well that explains it! Grace is amazing only if we understand ourselves to be undeserving. But that's not us! We are hard-working, church-going, good-deed-doing Christians. We've earned our reward. We're entitled to it. We've paid our dues!

The apostle Paul challenged this perspective when it popped up in the early church. I guess you could say he had to construct a theological concept in order to describe the way God deals with humanity. There's something about the nature of grace that profoundly disrupts our notions of reward and deserving. As the apostle Paul described it, *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God---not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* [Ephesians 2:8,9]

Grace is not payment; it is gift. We're so immersed in a culture of commodity, in which everything has a price tag, that we may forget what a gift is. Think of the last one you've received. Getting a birthday present isn't grace. If you're like me, you EXPECT a gift on your birthday; woe to the son who does not deliver! Christmas gifts aren't very often grace-full; they come with the unswerving certainty of the calendar. A "gift exchange" is an oxymoron; the very idea of giving, knowing that you'll receive as well, cancels a sense of giftedness. Presbyterian pastor and author Fredrick Buechner puts it this way: *Grace is something you can never get, but only be given. There's no way to earn it, or deserve it or bring*

it about anymore than you can deserve the taste of raspberries. . .or bring about your own birth. Grace is a good sleep; good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. [from Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC] A gift is freely given without expectation of return, with no strings attached. Sort of like receiving a full-day's wage, when you've worked an hour. Now there was a gift!

Jesus showed us that God is generous, overflowing with mercy, and heaven-bent on loving the whole world into wholeness. God gives not according to our just deserts, but according to our need. We can be free of the fear that whispers "there isn't enough!" We can dare to imagine that we don't get what we deserve because that is far, far LESS than God wants to give us! We can stop the ultimately life-denying game of comparison, that makes us feel alive only if we're "ahead." We can enjoy what we have received without denying those gifts to others. We can appreciate the varying contributions of different people without defensiveness. A recognition that we ALL need God's grace helps us respond with gratitude rather than jealous calculation.

But I sound so earnest! And you look so serious! The fact is, "grace" cannot be learned by intellect alone. Listen: A Fairmount member recently told me about her grandmother, who was the daughter, sister, and granddaughter of Presbyterian ministers. She grew up in an era when Sunday afternoon meant formal visits in parishoners' homes, sitting quietly while the grown ups chatted. One particular Sunday, she'd had enough. She wandered out of the parlor to the front porch where she started playing and jumping off the front steps. When her absence was noticed and she was found, the hostess reprimanded her sharply, "Don't you know what day this is?" and the little miss responded, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

That's a story of grace, and if it made you laugh, all the better, because as 20th century theologian Karl Barth claimed, "Laughter is the closest thing we have to the grace of God." The subversive laughter that brings down the high and mighty and exalts the little one. The divine delight in giving and forgiving without regard for just deserts. The holy joy in seeing life not as a competition to be won, but a purpose to fulfill.

But I know what you're thinking, because I'm thinking it too. If everyone gets rewarded at the end of the day, what's the motivation for working all day long? Does grace undermine the whole idea of being good, for following Jesus, for living God's way? Why bear the burden of laboring in the heat of the day if you don't get any more credit for it than someone who makes a death-bed confession? Only this: because you know your need of God's mercy and grace, and have discovered that while it is not the only way to live, it's the best way. How can we begrudge God's generosity? How can we compete for what is there in abundance? How can we lose when God is "for" us, each one of us?

He began to teach in parables: The kingdom of God is like two brothers who were called by God to give up all they had and serve humanity. The older brother responded to the call and went off to a distant land to spend himself in the service of the poor. He was imprisoned for his work, tortured and put to death. And the Lord said, "Well done, my good and faithful servant! You gave me a thousand measures of service. I shall now give you a thousand million measures of blessing. Enter into the joy of my kingdom." The younger brother responded to the call. He prospered in his business. He was kind to his wife and children and made regular financial contributions to charitable organizations. And when he died, the Lord said, "Well done, my good and faithful servant! You gave me twenty measures of service. I shall now give you a thousand million measures of blessing. Enter into the joy of my kingdom." It is said that when the older boy was told that his brother would receive the same reward as he, he was surprised. And he

rejoiced. "Lord," he said, "had I known this at the time you called me. . . . I would have done exactly what I did for love of you." [The Song of the Bird, by Anthony de Mello, pp. 134, 135]

Best-selling author Anne Lamott acknowledges she doesn't understand the mystery of grace; "only that it meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us." Grace changes us. We live neither in a world of determinism in which our choices don't matter; nor in a world of chaos in which everything is random. The grace of God shakes the foundations, even as it provides shelter when life comes tumbling down around us.

I caught up with the young member who did the dialog sermon four years ago. He has just graduated from high school and will be off to college on the east coast this Fall. We chatted a bit about his plans, and then he did what almost every church member does when they run into the minister unexpectedly: he started to apologize for not showing up at worship more often. "Hey," I said, waving him off. "Tell me what "grace" means to you."

"Okay," he said, "well it's not religious. To me it's beauty, smoothness, goodness, the way things are supposed to be." "Not bad," I responded, "and you know, that's what the church says God gives us, all of us, no matter what our attendance is." "Oh yeah," he added, "I meant to say that."

I think he did. And I have faith that God's grace will accompany him, just as it accompanies us, through every danger, toil, and snare, and bring us, at last, to home. Amazing! Amen.

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