

The Gift of Grace

Questions of the Congregation Series
I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about: Grace

by

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Jonah 3:10 - 4:11

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

⁴But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. ⁶The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a

hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

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In any number of Bible studies that I have led over the years, and even in the ones that I have participated in as a student, it is almost inevitable that at some point, someone will comment that they have always understood the God of the New Testament to be more loving and compassionate than the God of the Old Testament.

We can easily understand that sentiment. The personal extensions of grace that we read in story after story from the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth are compelling. If this is

God incarnate - God walking among us - I too will take that God most days over the one that turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt.

But the deeper we dig, we find that the story is more complicated than we are usually taught. A great example of this is the familiar story of the Old Testament prophet Jonah. The book of Jonah falls victim to the reality that any story that prominently features an animal is considered a story for children. That means we often tell and hear a rather simplified version of Jonah and the God who tracked him down in the belly of a whale.

You will recall that God enlists Jonah to travel to the city of Nineveh - a place that was deserving of the punishment of a vengeful God - to declare to them their destruction and to encourage them to repent. A simple reading of Jonah gives the impression that God's judgement has scared Jonah so much that he runs away, rather than be a part of God's justice. Once God gets Jonah back on dry land and to the gates of Nineveh declaring their need for repentance, the people in the city take the threat seriously and repent in sackcloth and ashes. Thank God for Jonah we say! His courage in bringing this message of love is what has saved these wretched people.

We tell the story this way because we often stop reading Jonah at the end of Chapter Three. The text we have heard this morning, is Chapter Four.

It turns out that Jonah did not run away from the judgment of God. Jonah was running away from God's mercy - mercy that Jonah himself didn't really think that the people of Nineveh deserved. In Jonah's rebuke of God's forgiveness, he comes off like a petulant child pitching a fit with his mother who has acted with loving kindness towards a wayward sibling. He goes so far as to ask for his own death rather than have to exist in a world with a forgiving God.

It is this Old Testament God who gives Jonah a lecture about the value of life - the inherent value of the living things that God has created and grown in this world. God's creatures are valid and worthy recipients of God's mercy, no matter what they have done, and no matter Jonah's opinion of them. No harm is done to Jonah through God's generosity, and yet he takes it as a personal affront.

This story of Jonah is included with the other Old Testament prophets but scholars really consider it a parable - a story told to teach its hearers something important about the nature of God. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast

love. We actually can read this exact same turn of phrase throughout the Old Testament: in the Torah, the first five books of the Bibles, the Psalms, and the hymn book of the Old Testament. The language appears even in the text of other prophets.

God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. It is that exact same God that is described in our New Testament parable for this morning - the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard as told to us in the Gospel of Matthew.

In this kingdom parable, Jesus sets the scene in the vineyards of a prominent landowner, and while tradition has named this the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, it more aptly should called the parable of the Generous Householder.

As the story goes, the head of the household goes into the market to hire laborers for the day, not just once but five separate times, each time bringing more and more workers to the fields to care for his crop. It is clear that as he hires the first group of workers that he has agreed to the standard daily wage, and it only vaguely alludes to how much all of the other workers who come to work throughout the course of the day have been promised. Mostly the owner has promised to do what is right.

Now this is a completely fictional parable, so we are free to imagine these characters reacting in any number of ways as they worked in the field together. Certainly, those first workers were exhausted by the end of the day, but also curious at the arrival of new team after team joining them in the fields. Maybe they felt pride in putting in a full day's hard work in the sun, but also wondered what deal their co-laborers had arranged for a pro-rated daily wage. What would have been in the minds of those who joined later and later in the day, wondering how they would fair in the end, clearly with less work to show for themselves to justify their compensation.

At the end of the day, the owner arranges for the workers to be paid in the reverse order to which they had been hired, leaving those that worked a full day to watch as laborer after laborer are paid the exact same daily wage they themselves had been promised. And so they witnessed the generosity of the owner, and began to assume in a very human way, that he too would be generous with them. When they receive exactly what they have been promised and exactly what they agreed to, they channel their inner Jonah, and lose their cool.

The owner in the story reacts in a very similar way that God does to Jonah as well - asking why the workers feel so offended by his willingness to be generous with others?

This summer we have been preaching through the topical requests that you all sent us in the spring - questions and reflections that you were particularly interested in - and this summer we have received multiple requests to hear sermons about grace. Of course that is a little odd to say it in that way since the vast majority of sermons you hear from this pulpit and likely any pulpit are in the end about grace.

In seminary, my preaching professor advised us that if we ever struggled to come up with a title for a sermon in the course of our ministry that we can always just fall back on the generic title - *the Gift of Grace* - and it will likely fit the bill.

Why do we need so many sermons about grace? Because the grace of God is at the same time incredibly simple and incredibly complicated. Likely, we all need a lifetime of sermons on grace to be able to work it all out. Because the radical grace of God, does not really fit into our human understanding of how anything is supposed to work. So we try to work it out for ourselves.

We say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgement and the God of the New Testament is a God of mercy as though the two things are mutually exclusive. And we have just as hard of a time understanding the gift of grace as it relates to our own relationship with God as we do with understanding God's willingness to generously offer grace to others, especially those who have deemed irredeemable.

In 1948, Theologian and Ethicist Paul Tillich wrote one of his most widely acclaimed sermons on grace, entitled, *You Are Accepted*. In it he speaks of our inability to understand grace in a world rife with sin and sin's inevitable consequence - separation, separation from God and from one another. He talks about the troubles of the world as the nation in that moment continued to recover from the devastation and hatred surrounding World War II perched at the beginnings of the modern civil rights movement. The sins of the world and the sins of our hearts make it hard to believe in a loving and merciful God let alone a loving and merciful world. He writes:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old

compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying:

‘You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything, do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!’¹

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.

In grappling with the inherited sins of her own family, Theologian Serene Jones, has written as well about what it means to believe in that kind of grace in the face of such dismay at the world, she writes,

In the face of evil, I choose not to give in, It doesn’t mean I have all the answers, it only means I’ve chosen to accept that grace dwells side by side with sin. Even when - indeed, especially when - the odds are against it. Embedded in this acceptance of Grace is also my abiding belief that love has already won the battle. Ultimately. Grace is always there. Grace is more original than sin.²

Accepting God’s grace for ourselves and for others, isn’t just about hoping that we have done enough to earn it knowing that God will make up the gap in our failings. Accepting God’s grace for ourselves and for others is about recognizing that we can spend a lifetime often doing the wrong things, and even as those laborers who came at the very end of the day - doing next to nothing, and still live in a world where God is foolishly generous with the gift of grace.

Grace is too complicated to try to relegate it to two categories - Old Testament verses New Testament, sin verses forgiveness, judgement verses mercy, justice verses loving kindness. And most importantly - those who deserve it and those who don’t.

¹ Tillich, Paul. *Shaking the Foundations*. Wipf and Stock. 2012.

² Jones, Serene. *Call it Grace*. Viking Press. 2019.

The thing though that I love so much about both of these parables, is the way God responds to our human struggles with grace. Because in truth grace is actually also very simple.

Jonah can't handle the possibility that God can forgive an enemy that he has been taught his whole life to be against. How can God offer life and mercy to a people who seem to have been against God from the start, like an Assyrian city such as Nineveh would have been? Jonah had judged them on God's behalf, and now he has to deal with the truth that when the time came for an actual judgement, God easily offered love and grace.

Just like these first workers can't handle the possibility that the fact that even though they worked the hardest, that they faithfully did what was asked of them, that they earned what was coming to them, in the abundance of God's economy rewards just don't follow a human pattern. In the market and in the fields, what is right is not just what is fair, but what is generous and loving.

God's response to Jonah and the householder's response to the laborers are strikingly similar and simple. God is generous and full of grace, and God's generosity is only good. And God is planning to be as generous and good as needed in this world and in the kingdom to come. So deal with it.

This fall as a whole congregation, we are inviting you to participate in reading together a small book by theologian Ben Myers on the Apostle's Creed. You can look for more information about this small group project using Myers' book in emails and mailings from the church over the next few weeks.

What is really interesting, is that the word grace - something that is so essential to our faith, never appears in the Apostles' Creed, a theological statement that we might say explains the most essential elements of ecumenical Christianity. What I really love about Myers book is that in the way he writes about the creed, is that he is able to help us understand and discover the simplicity and complexity of grace found in almost every ancient word of it.

In his chapter on the phrase - "and he will come to judge the living and the dead," he writes this:

The judgement that Christ brings is not a division between two kinds of people. When Christ's light shine into our lives, it creates a division within ourselves. None of us are entirely good or entirely bad. Each of us is a mixture. The bad grows up in our lives like weeds among the wheat, and the two are so closely entwined that in life we can't easily tell the difference. Sometimes our worst mistakes turn out to produce good fruit. And sometimes we discover that our virtues have produced unforeseen collateral damage. Our lives are not transparent to ourselves. We cannot easily tell where the bad ends and the good begins.

So it is a comfort to know that one day someone else will come and lovingly separate the good from the bad in our lives. The confession that Christ will come as judge is not an expression of terror and doom it is part of the good news of the gospel.

Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead and that will be the best thing that ever happens to us. On that day the weeds in each of us will be separated from the wheat. It will hurt, when our self-deceptions are burned away. But the pain of truth heals; it does not destroy. On our judgement day we will be able for the first time to see the truth of our lives, when we see ourselves as loved.³

The truth of the Gospel is this - God's grace is abundant. God's freedom in loving us and loving the world - even those who we cannot love - is beyond our understanding. And so as recipients of that grace, we are free to choose to live our lives as people who have received love and who try each day to reflect that love into the world. Somedays that work is simple, but most days it is complicated.

Thank God we are given a lifetime of days to try to work it out. May we always give thanks for being able to do this work together, and may we always give thanks that we have been created by a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Amen.

³ Myers, Ben. *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism*. Lexham Press. 2018.