

AMAZING GRACE

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, February 7, 2016

Based on Matthew 20:1-15; Ephesians 2:4-8

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled “Ten Truths that Change Life,” during which we are looking at key Biblical ideas which have been and continue to be revolutionary in human life. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Is life fair? Many people complain that life is not fair.

The idea of fairness originates early in life, as we struggle over who gets what. We compete with other kids over toys on the playground; we stress over how much ice cream we get in our bowl. The idea of fairness is a way of controlling the distribution of good things. I am O.K. with what I get, as long as everyone gets equal time in the sandbox, as long as my sister does not get more marshmallows in her hot chocolate than I do. Notice how the notion of fairness arises out of our desire for self-protection—it is a way of ensuring that I get my fair share. This is why the most common complaint heard from children is the phrase, “It’s not fair!” They say this whenever they feel they are not getting their due.

In human religious experience, we noted in this series that human beings have had a universal awareness of God, but that as they try to conceive what God is like, they have imagined all sorts of things about God. One of the most common things that human beings have imagined about God is that God is, or should be, fair. God in the human imagination becomes the heavenly parent who is responsible for seeing that everyone gets an equal share of marshmallows; and if people do not seem to be getting an equal share of marshmallows, there must be some way that God is going to set things straight in the end. Many of the world’s religions have this kind of concept built into them—whether it is the idea of karma in eastern religions, which says that everyone ultimately gets a cosmic payback for everything they do—or whether it is ideas of judgment, which say that everyone will finally get their due reward or punishment. Religions generally want to say that God is fair, while conversely, atheists will often deny God because it seems to them that the world is not fair.

It is precisely at this point that the Bible declares one of its most revolutionary ideas. In the Bible, there are many words used to describe the nature of God—good, just, compassionate, mighty . . . there are scores of words that describe God—but the Bible never says that God is fair. This is because the notion of fairness arises not from God but from our human sinfulness—our desire to exalt and advance ourselves; people have been interested in fairness from the earliest years because they want to protect their share. But God, according to the Bible, is not fair. God is not the divine arbiter who must give everyone their due. God is far *more* than fair. The word that the Bible uses in this regard to describe God is the word “grace.”

“Grace” means giving people what they do not deserve. It means rewarding people with what they have not earned, bestowing upon them far more than their fair share. Grace is unmerited beneficence. When God forgives people who are guilty, and blesses people who are unworthy, that is grace.

The whole story of the Old Testament is a story of God’s amazing grace. Abraham does nothing to deserve God’s blessing, but God gives him amazing promises. His descendants in Egypt do not show much faith, but God rescues them and leads them to the promised land. In the promised land, the people continually forget God and break God’s laws, but God continues to love and guide them. The people do not deserve what God gives; but God is wondrously good to them anyways. God is gracious.

Nevertheless, people in ancient times struggled to grasp the whole idea of God’s grace. By the New Testament time period, the prevailing idea in popular religion in Palestine was the idea of fairness—that everybody should be receiving their appropriate reward or punishment. In this context, the message of Jesus was stunning, because Jesus fully represented the whole idea of grace.

We see it prominently in the parable we heard this morning. Jesus told a story about a landowner who went into town early in the morning to hire day laborers for his vineyard. *[A landowner went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Matt. 20:1]* This was a common scenario in the ancient world. Landowners needed extra hands at certain seasons of the year, and if you were a worker needing employment, and if you were industrious, you would be sure to get yourself to the town square at the crack of dawn, so as to have the best chance of getting hired. In the parable, the landowner hires the laborers that he finds in the marketplace, and agrees to pay them “the usual daily wage.” *[After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage he sent them into his vineyard. Matt. 20:2]* Later in the morning, the landowner goes into town again and hires more workers. Jesus says it is now 9:00—the hearers would presume that the first workers were hired around 6:00 a.m., at dawn—and the landowner promises to pay the new workers “whatever is right,” which one presumes would be some percentage of the usual daily wage, since a full day’s farm work started at dawn. *[When the landowner went about 9:00, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, “you also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” Matthew 20:4]* This scenario repeats itself all day long. The landowner goes into town again at noon, and then at 3:00, hiring workers each time. *[When he went out about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. Matt. 20:5]* Finally, he goes into town at 5:00; and as Jesus said, he found others standing around, and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said, “Because no one hired us.” *[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?” They said to him, “Because no one hired us.” Matt. 20:6]* The hearer thinks, “Of course no one hired you. You were lazy and didn’t get

yourself to the marketplace until way late. This guy has been hiring all day!" But, says Jesus, "the landowner said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." [Matt. 20:7]

Finally it is paytime. The landowner instructs his manager to hand out the pay starting with the last and ending with the first. *[When 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." Matt. 20:8]* The earlybird workers naturally assume that those lazybones who came late in the day will be paid some small fraction of the usual daily wage. But when the workers who started at 5:00 get paid, they are given the full daily wage! *[When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Matt. 20:9]* The workers who came at dawn are now thinking, "Wow, if they got paid the usual daily wage, we should be getting a real nice paycheck!" *[Now when the first workers came, they thought they would receive more Matt. 20:10a]* But they get the usual daily wage. *[but each of them also received the usual daily wage Matt. 20:10b]* And what do they say? It's not fair! Or as Jesus put it, "They grumbled against the landowner, saying, "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!" [Matt. 20:11]

I have found when teaching Bible studies that this is a parable with which many people have real difficulty, precisely because we feel that these first workers are right. The whole scenario is not fair, at least not according to our usual human definition of fairness, by which we think that slackers should be rewarded less than people who work long and hard. What happens in the parable is not fair. But this is exactly Jesus' point. God, like the landowner, is not fair; God is far more than fair.

The first workers in the story are not cheated. They receive precisely what they were promised and what they thought at the outset was fair—the usual daily wage. What makes them unhappy, of course, is that the last workers got far more than what they deserved—getting a full day's wage for only an hour's work. But the landowner replies to them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to the last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" [Matt. 20:13-15]

The landowner is a picture of grace. He pays to the last workers way more than what they deserve. Their pay derives not from what they have earned, but from the owner of the vineyard's generosity.

Jesus is telling us that God is like this. God gives us far more than what we deserve. What exactly have we earned in life? God gave us life to begin with. God gave us all our natural abilities. God gave us this marvelous world. We did not earn any of that. And what have we done with all that God has given us? We may have done some good, and some of us may have done more good than others, which leads us to imagine that we should be rewarded more; but the reality is that when it comes to how

well we have worked in God's vineyard, when it comes to how closely we have followed God, we all come up short. As the apostle Paul said, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) We did not earn this life to begin with, and we certainly have not earned eternal life. Indeed with the many blessings we have received in this life we have already been paid far more than what we deserve.

But God chooses to act with extraordinary generosity. [*The landowner said, "I choose to give . . . Are you envious because I am generous?" from Matt. 20:13-15*] God comes to us in Jesus, who offers his life for us on the cross, so that we can be forgiven, and so that we can receive the gift of life eternal. God offers us endless blessing, which we have not earned. This is grace—God's unmerited favor.

Our passage in Ephesians summed it up well: "By grace you are saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2:8)

This core proclamation of the Bible—that God acts toward us with grace—is one of the most revolutionary spiritual ideas in the history of humanity. People still have trouble with it, especially if we feel we are working hard and are doing what is right, and we see others who are not quite up to snuff, and we really resent the idea that they might get an equal share of the pie. But the picture changes when we realize how we really stand before God. If God is fair—if God is going to give us for all eternity only what we deserve, only what we have earned—then we are in trouble. But the good news is that God is not fair—God is a God of grace, and God has acted in Jesus Christ to give us infinitely more than what we have earned. We are invited to receive God's grace in faith, and then in thankfulness to show that same kind of grace to others.