

Matthew 20:1-16
September 20, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Like many of you and many across the globe, I began to pray even more fervently soon after the beginning of this pandemic. As our building closed, schools were shut down, sporting events cancelled, and life as we knew it suddenly came to a screeching halt. It was readily apparent this was like nothing we had experienced before. We could not fully grasp our minds around the scope and magnitude of this invisible virus that was wreaking havoc across the globe.

As the days went along and days turned into weeks and then weeks into months, I discovered a new twist in my devotional time. Often, my prayers or thoughts might be expressed through poetry. Now, in no stretch of the imagination do I consider myself a poet and only God knows the words printed upon those pages. So, when I contemplated including one of these poems within a sermon it was fraught with a bit of angst. After all, what if it is not really that good of poem?

Well, here goes it anyway with a poem titled "Grace" scribbled out several weeks ago.

Grace

It truly is an amazing thing

Grace

More beautiful than a diamond ring

Grace

Just what the world needs

Grace

As it cannot pay for its sinful deeds

Grace

Will never run out

Grace

Is free without a doubt

Grace

Does not always seem fair

Grace

Extend a little each day if you dare

Grace

A portrait of the kingdom come

Grace

Open to all, not just some

Grace

Flows from the heart of God each day

Grace

Heals the world's hurt like no other way

Grace

Is all about love

Grace

A gift from our God up above!

We Lutherans love to talk about grace. We cling to the promise that it is by grace we are saved. The grace of God revealed in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, if you are like me, you might wrestle with that concept of grace from time to time. Perhaps, clinging to deeply embedded theologies that attempt to rob grace from the gift it is or thinking there is something you have done that makes you unworthy of God's abundant grace. Or it is thinking behind every gift is a catch – the giver wants something in return, and we are forever in their debt. The gift becomes no longer that for which its name implies and perhaps the original intent of the one offering it. Or it has just become woven into our minds that everything we receive must be earned by hard work on our part.

This evening, I begin the annual Fall Theological Conference offered to rostered leaders within the Southeastern Iowa Synod. What normally is an in-person event has now, like so many other things, moved into a virtual online learning experience. As I opened a recently sent email with various attachments, I came across a bingo card. It appears to be a fun way to keep us engaged, to break up the monotony of one more Zoom meeting. Amidst our time together we are to

attempt to fill in the boxes creating a bingo through observing happenings such as: a pet entering into someone's frame, that person or persons who forget to mute or unmute themselves (the latter will be me), a dog barking in the background or Bishop Burk mentioning his impending retirement. And, like any Bingo card, there is the very center is the box marked "Free Space." Yet, we Lutheran's have titled it slightly differently, "Grace is free just like this space."

Grace is where my mind always goes upon reading this parable. The grace of the vineyard owner. The joy and gratitude that must have been experienced by the workers hired toward the end of the day, when no one else would, upon receiving wages that will provide just enough to meet their daily needs. And yes, even the difficulty of trying to comprehend the owner's generosity.

So many times, I find myself over analyzing Jesus's parables. There must be more behind them than meets the eye and often there is. Yet sometimes we just need to look at them on face value and what they reveal about the kingdom of God Jesus is ushering in. Once again Jesus paints the portrait of the great reversal where the last will be first and the first will be last. Another rendering of the teaching he began in Chapter 5 high atop a mountain in which he put forth the assurance of God's blessings upon the likes of those who are poor in spirit, mourn and are meek, hunger and thirst for righteousness, merciful and pure in heart, peacemakers persecuted and reviled. Rejoice Jesus says for yours is the kingdom of heaven!

I find that to be at the core of today's parable. The vineyard coming to those standing on the fringes longing to be seen, heard, and their hands to be used. Yet, the vineyard owner sees them. Whatever it is that has led others to shy away, overlook them, and leave them destitute does not deter this landowner. Nor is he deterred in providing for all laborers, whether they arrived earlier or later in the day, exactly what it is they need. Just enough money to secure food for their family that day. This owner appears to see the needs of all. Appears to see all have a place in the vineyard. Appears to affirm each laborer has gifts that will assist in producing an abundant harvest to be shared with the world. Appears to extend to all equally.

It would seem this is the portrait of the God whom we believe in. It fulfills exactly what is promised through the Son of God who gave his life – forgiveness and salvation to all. Nobody stands outside of the abundant grace of God. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God we have in Christ Jesus. Grace is a most treasured gift to behold!

We know this pandemic, which we cannot fully comprehend, wrap our minds around, or fathom will come to an end in time. We will be forever changed by it and there will be goodness the Spirit births to life through this global tragedy. Perhaps, a better appreciation and gratitude for so many things we took all too easily for granted. Perhaps, greater joy when we can gather safely once again in person. Perhaps, opening the church's eyes to new ways of being church together, proclaiming the gospel to a broader scope of people, and letting go of some things that were simply no longer bearing forth fruit of the kingdom.

This pandemic will come to an end. We will be changed by it. But God's grace, which we also cannot fully comprehend in our mortal flesh, will *never* come to an end. It will always continue to change and transform us molding us into the people of God created and called to be beautiful and sacred vessels of God's grace in the world. Wherever you find yourself at this morning. Whatever lays upon your heart. Whatever struggles you endure. Whatever hurts you harbor. Whatever it is. Know you never stand outside of God's grace. That grace is free. Like the center square of a bingo card, there is nothing you need to do. That grace is unailing. That grace is unending. That grace is all about love and a most precious gift from the God up above!