

## The Grace of God

### Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

When I was in seminary I spent my weekends learning how to preach in two rural churches (about 100 miles south of Chicago)... and since the two churches were in a (search for their own full-time pastor) I shared some of the responsibilities with another seminarian named Heidi (who was not only a good preacher and communicator) but was especially good at speaking to the children (during the children's sermon on Sunday mornings)...

In fact, I'll always remember a children sermon she told about gifts... and as a good Lutheran she was trying to teach the children that God's love is a gift (not something that we could ever earn or deserve)... and as the children gathered around her, she asked the children, "*What do you say when someone gives you a gift?*"...

One little hand when up and said, "*I always say thank you!*"...

And so Heidi smiled and said, "*I want to give all of you a gift this morning!... Would that be okay?*"... of course, all the children nodded their heads (and their eyes lit up)... and so Heidi pulled out a hand full of shiny new quarters... one kid rubbed his hands together and was eager to get one for himself...

and so Heidi said, "*Okay, if you want one of the quarters – you have to put your hands out and say, 'please!'*" – and as she started distributing the quarters you'd think that Heidi was giving out bars of gold... the kids laughed and they smiled and (showed their parents sitting in the pews their new found treasure)... but there was only one problem – Heidi said, "*it looks like I've run out of quarters – and there are still two children left!... What do you think we should do?*"... Finally Heidi said, "*I know – I'll give those kids a dollar bill!*"...

With that – all of the kids looked up – shocked at the suggestion... (it was as if the music had come to a screeching halt)... you could almost feel the envy and the jealousy in the eyes of the children who were holding quarters (as the other children were being given dollar bills)...

and before Heidi could ask the children how they felt about receiving their gifts (one of the little kids – about 4 years old – ran to his mother crying and said, "*Heidi isn't being fair!*")... of course, the whole congregation laughed – but in

some ways the little boy was right... it wasn't fair (which was Heidi's point)... a gift is never about fairness (it's about love – and it's about Grace)...

I share that story with you this morning because it reminded me of the parable that Jesus teaches us this morning... it's a story about a landowner who gives out a different type of gift – the gift of employment... and as the story is told, first he hires a few men looking for work (early in the morning) and agrees to pay them a daily wage for their labor... around 9 o'clock the landowner hires another crew (and again – promises to pay them what is fair)...

and this obviously goes on and on – even *'til the end of the day'* – giving people who were *out of work* (an opportunity to earn a wage – and in essence – feed their families)... and I have to guess (that like it is for the men we see standing on street corners in cities all around the world – hoping to find work) if you're one of the people chosen on that day (and given an opportunity to earn a wage) it must seem like a gift from God (because – at least for that day – you'll have enough to live off of)... you woke up that day with nothing – but by evening you'll have what you need...

But here's the funny thing about the story (the part that may not seem fair) – the landowner rounds everyone up that evening (after the work day is over) and he pays them all the same amount... and just like that child who ran to his mother (accusing Heidi of not being fair) some of the men who had worked all day in the vineyard accused the landowner of the same thing – they accused him of not being fair...

And so, the first question we have to ask ourselves is – *what's the meaning of this story? – And why did Jesus feel it was so important to tell it?...* And even more importantly - *What does it mean for us today?...*

Well, let me simply say that the image of the vineyard has always been used by Jews as a metaphor of Israel... We read in Isaiah 5:7, "*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts- is the house of Israel*" – and the reason being is that like a vineyard (Israel was surrounded by a wall of God's protection – it was to be spiritually cultivated and cared for – and if proper pruning were to take place – God always promised that Israel would bear good fruit for the world...

God being the land owner... the Jews being the workers in the vineyard... and the wages being God's Grace (which is His love, and His mercy, and his forgiveness)..

And so, one way to understand Jesus' parable is that those who came *early in the morning to work* were the Jews – and those who came later in the day (and yet were paid the same amount) are you and me (the Gentiles)... and if you were a Jew (and you heard Jesus telling this story – I think you'd also react the way that little boy with the quarter) – you'd want to run to your mother in tears and say, "*God isn't being fair!*"...

because – think about it – the Jews had spent centuries living God's law, cultivating it (defending it when it was attacked) and now Jesus is saying to them that everyone's equal – (that non-Jews had the same hope of heaven and Grace - as God's Chosen people)... as you can imagine – that was a hard pill to swallow for some who heard the message of Jesus for the first time... in fact, it was one of the main reasons why they wanted Jesus dead...

I guess it would be like welcoming our newest member into the fold (here at Faith) and then saying, "*Guess what – you're now the president of the congregation – and go ahead and pick any pew you want and we'll put your name on it and make it yours*"... I can imagine (if that was suggested) a few feathers would be ruffled... and it's not because they're not capable of doing a great job – but because some people would naturally think to themselves, "*but I've been here for 50 years... no one ever asked me to be president – and I was never offered my own pew*"... simply put – it wouldn't seem fair...

But I think that's exactly what Jesus is trying to communicate in the parable this morning – that God's Grace isn't always fair!...

I mean think about it for a moment – it's a wonderful thing to know God (and to know of His love and His compassion and His forgiveness) – we might even call it Amazing Grace (especially if you can remember a time in your own life when you were once lost and walked through the Valley of the Shadow of Death *yourself*)... and Grace is so beautiful when you've tasted death – when you've tasted Hell... and it can bring a smile to your face and give you reason to worship and to sing praises to the Lord - when you know that you have it...

But do you understand what Jesus is really saying?... He's saying that it doesn't stop with you... it doesn't stop with me... and it doesn't stop with us... Salvation through Jesus Christ is open to those who held Jesus in their arms (as a baby in the manger), as well as, to the thief who died alongside of him on the cross... ... it's open to those who have come to know Jesus as an infant through baptism – and it's open to those who come to know him on their deathbed... it's open to our family

and our loved ones – but it's also open to those who have hurt us and caused us pain...

And in knowing that – in knowing that we're not the only ones who have been saved (or who will taste the goodness of the Lord) may be a hard pill for some of us to swallow as well... it might even make us think like that little boy (and the workers in the vineyard) who said, "*this isn't fair!*"... *that God isn't fair!*... *that Grace is not fair!*...

And that's what I really believe Jesus was trying to say in his parable this morning... (that God isn't fair)...

But remember this – if God was fair (we'd all be in trouble!)... because I don't know about you (but if the only way into Heaven was living perfectly – without blemish or sin – I know I'd be in trouble)... and there's no doubt in my mind – that if reaching a state of perfection was a prerequisite for our salvation – I know that I would never be able to make it...

And although complex and impossible to fully understand (that itself is the gift – that God isn't trying to be fair – but always and forever being love)... and offering us a chance to be with Him (in spite of our brokenness)...

And it's not a question of whether or not you've earned that gift... the question becomes – can you receive it?... Can you receive an unfair gift?...

Let me close with a story about a man who had his own questions (about what we're talking about this morning)... and he wondered – like people have done since the beginning of time – about the Kingdom of Heaven...

And one night he fell asleep (and in a dream he met God)... and in the dream he was immediately taken aback by God's brilliance and His beauty... and it was as if the man could feel the love radiating from God's heart... and at once the man felt a deep sense of peace and calm come over him...

And feeling comfortable in God's presence the man asked the Lord "if he had died?" (and if he was in Heaven)...

and God said to the man, "No, you haven't died – with Me you never will"...

Confused the man said, "Why do you always say things like that?... Of course, I'll die – all people do!"... But again, God reassured him that *through Him* there was no death – but only life... a more abundant life than he could ever imagine"...

And so the man said, “And how do I come to you?”...

And not surprisingly – God said, “You don’t – I come to you!... and I invite you in!”...

“But let me ask you a question”, the man wondered, “Why would you invite me in?... What have I done to deserve your love?”...

And God said, “Nothing!... but I’ve loved you since the day you were born... and my greatest hope is that we’ll be together in Heaven”...

But the man said, “You know it’s funny that you bring up this whole idea of Heaven... there were many times in my life when I thought about Heaven... when I was young I thought it was a place that only very special people went to... but can I ask you another question?... is it true that even some of my enemies might be in Heaven?...”

And God said, “Yes!... They’re not my enemies – they’re my children – and I love them the same way I love you!”...

“Well,” the man said, “then I’m not sure I want to go”...

But God replied, “Heaven is not a place you go to live with your enemies... Heaven is already inside of you – and you’ll experience when you stop trying to figure everything out and simply learn to trust me completely!... and I can make you one very important promise – in the end - you will be happy that you did!”...

Friends, what I like about that story is that I think it gives us some answers to our discussion this morning... in that - Jesus tells us that Grace is not fair (that God is not fair) – and we too can rack our brains trying to figure out who is going to be in Heaven (and who’s going to be left out)... but all we’re asked to do is to trust God... to receive the free gift of His Grace and His love – and hold onto it – because in the end (I know I am correct in saying) the only thing that’s going to matter is that all of us are going to be with God...

And to have God in your heart – is to have everything that you’ll ever need...

May the blessings of the Lord’s whisper fill your heart with peace and joy... may you leave His house this morning knowing that you are special in the eyes of God... and may we all embrace the free gift of His Grace – now and forever!...

In Jesus’ name we pray... **Amen!**