

Lake Cities Community Church
Series: Community
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“The Surprising Game of Grace”
(Matthew 20:1-16)

On our five-year anniversary, Tammy and I took a trip to Orlando. It was our big Disney World vacation – five days with Mickey Mouse and his friends. Some good friends of ours had parents in the area, Earl and Marge and they had arranged for us to stay with them for one night. Earl and Marge were probably in their 70’s – a delightful couple who wore the years of marriage well. They smiled at each other and held hands the way newlyweds do. We were warmly invited into their home. They treated us like one of their family. The first evening, they invited us to play a game of cards. It was a memorable game.

After we had played for a while, Marge said to Earl, “Hunny, let’s let Tammy win this time – she hasn’t won yet.” “Oh, you are right, dear, yes – let’s have Tammy win this time. You have not had much luck in this game - dear - why don’t you draw again until you get the card that you need!” And so we played the game of cards – ignoring the basic rules to make sure that Tammy won the game. We played by Earl and Marge’s rules!

You might say: “That’s no fun – you have taken the competition out of the game – what’s the point? How can you enjoy winning when you really didn’t *deserve to win*? If you are going to play a game – you have to play by the rules -- right? Well, not all the time - this morning we are looking at the topic of grace and we will see that grace is a very surprising game. I believe everything we have been talking about the last 9 weeks comes down to understanding grace – there is no unity in the church without much grace!

Matthew 20 – A Picture of Grace

Turn with me to Matthew 20. This is a parable – not about a card game, but the employment game – an employer and employees. And in this parable Jesus shows us the game of grace. Jesus is describing His Kingdom: “(1-2) For the Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. (2) When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.”

A denarius was the normal wage for one day’s work. The time is around 6:00 am - he hires some workers and they are sent to the field. But, as the day progresses, he continued to hire workers, “(3) He went out about the third hour (9:00am) and saw others standing idle in the market place; (4) and to those he said, ‘You also go into the vineyard and whatever is right I will give you.’ And so they went. There is no promise of a denarius – only “whatever is right.” The wages will be worked out later. And then more people are hired. (5) Again he went out about the sixth (noon) and ninth hour (3pm), and did the same thing. And then he hires still more! “(6) And about the 11th hour (5pm) he went out and found others standing around and he said to them, “Why have been you been standing here idle all day long?” (7) They said to him ‘Because no one hired us’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard, too.’

So we have give different groups – to the first set of workers, he said – one denarius for the one-day’s wage. To the rest he said “Trust me, I’ll do what is right.” Evening comes and it is time to pay the workers, (8) “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’ The last group is the 5pm group. What are the rules of game here? How do you handle this?

I can speak to this with some authority - I worked in the field of compensation management for almost 10 years. To pay people fairly – to follow the rules the key is: Proration! If the workday was 10 hours and that equaled one denarius – if you were hired at noon and worked only half a day – you would receive half a denarius. It is not hard math. But grace has surprising rules... verse nine:

(9) When those hired about the 11th hour came, each one received a denarius. (10) When those hired first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And so they grumble (11-12). When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' - so the owner who says, "(13) Friend I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is your and go – but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous? So the last shall be first and the first last."

The owner says – it is my land, my vineyard, my money – and I want to bless this person, who has only worked one hour. It is not conventional, it is not expected, it is surprising – and it is grace. When Jesus came he didn't play at all by the rules – he changed the rules. We moved from being under the law to being under grace. The apostle John said, "For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. (John 1:17)" Romans 6:14. The law says – you get what you deserve. Grace says you get what you don't deserve.

Lessons of Grace

What are some of the lessons of grace we learn from this parable? **First grace is generous.** Grace is not stingy. Grace cost the landowner something – grace goes beyond what is required. God is generous to us and we see in the Bible we are to be generous to one another. The Bible says pray for your enemies and those who persecute you. That is generous grace. The Bible says – forgive someone’s offense – not 7 times, but 70 times seven – that is a generous grace. There can be unity in the church only if people show generous grace to one another, as we are taught in this parable.

Second, grace is a gift, it is given voluntarily. The landowner was not required to show grace to the workers. Grace is never required, but comes as an act of love. William Barclay wrote: We cannot earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives us is given out of the goodness of his heart; what God gives is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a grace.” (Barclay, *Matthew*, 226). The gospel of grace is described as a “gift” from God to us. And we seek love with one another through gift giving. I set aside my rights for you – as a gift – voluntarily. I see a need in the church – I offer my time, money, leadership as a gift – voluntarily. No under compulsion – by as a free expression of my love for you.

Grace is generous, grace is a gift and **third, grace can cause grumbling.** You noticed that in the story! The generous landowner gave a gift of money to the recently hired men, and that caused grumbling in the ranks of those hired at 6pm, who had been working all day. See if the grace is directed at you – you respond in **gratitude.** But if you are watching grace be lavished on another – it can lead to grumbling. And this is a common lesson in the New Testament.

The disciples **grumbled** with the act of grace shown by a woman in Matthew 26 who broke a jar of expensive perfume – worth 300 denarii – a year’s wages and pours it all onto Christ to anoint him. They rebuked her for not selling it and giving the money to the poor. In the story of the prodigal son – remember the older brother **grumbled** about his father’s act of grace to the younger prodigal son who had squandered all the wealth. To these parties – grace seemed simply irresponsible. Regarding our story in Matthew 20, Philip Yancey said, “Grace sounds a note of unfairness...Jesus’ story makes no economic sense, and that was his intent. He was giving us a parable about grace, which cannot be calculated like a day’s wages.” (*What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, 60-61).

Sometimes when I am traveling with one of our four kids I put grace into action. I will stop and out of the goodness of my heart – not because they deserve it or have earned it – I will generously and voluntarily – stop and get the kids an ice-cream. I just seem to know just when a child needs a sonic oreo-cook blast with whip cream. And sometimes I will get not even the small size, but the large size. And if that child has not finished their treat when they arrive back at home and they bring it into the home and ever eye turns to see that Dad has extended grace to one child – how do the other hard working, faithful children naturally respond? The natural response is to grumble – That is not fair! An important lesson for us is that when grace is extended to another person – rejoice with them, because we are all under the grace of God.

Conclusion

Because God has extended grace to you and I, we in turn extend that grace to others. Generously, voluntarily we offer our gifts of grace to one another. In the 1980’s some of you

might recall a fad in which people would pay thousands of dollars to own a potbellied pig – a very cute exotic house pet imported mainly from Vietnam. Breeders claimed that the pigs were smart and would grow to only 40 pounds – like a medium sized dog. They were half right. The pigs were smart, but they grew to be 150 pounds quickly grew out of their owner’s apartments and houses. Then they became aggressive. And so, fairly quickly, there were hundreds of unwanted pot-bellied pigs. Dale Riffle came to the rescue – someone had given him one of these pigs and he fell in love with it. The pig however, never became toilet trained, and it began to eat the carpet, wallpaper and drywall of his house. But he loved the pig he sold his home and moved to a 5-acre farm, for the sake of his pig. He started taking in other unwanted pigs and today his legacy “PIGS animal sanctuary” houses over 400 pigs and unwanted pets. Riffle told a reporter, “We’re all on earth for some reason – and I guess pigs are my lot in life.”

The question most of us would have is – why would someone do all that for a pig? How could anyone love a pig? Why would someone voluntarily give up everything and in such a generous fashion dedicate their whole life to saving pigs? But you know the bigger question – Why would a holy God. A perfect God. A infinite God voluntarily give up his son – and generously offer to us the gift of salvation. Not because you deserved it. Not because you earned it. Not because you were at the front of the line. Only because of grace. **For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves – it is a gift of God – not by works, lest anyone could boast.**

You see grace *is like* the card game we played years ago in Orlando. God’s Grace is extended to you as a gift. God has always sought those who never seem to draw the right

cards, who are dealt difficult hands. Those who are unwanted in our society. Today – men and women, boys and girls God says – “You win.” Come to me and accept my gift of grace.