

### Incalculable Grace

If you can remember way back in B.C. time, that is, Before Coronavirus, you may recall a special worship service we held in early February. It was the same day as our church's annual meeting. We took the suggestion of some of our denominational planners, and in this year devoted to hearing God speak to us through the Gospel of Matthew, gave the service over to reading through the entire Sermon on the Mount, three full chapters long, interspersed with music and hymn singing. It was a powerful experience, for me at least. I hope it was for you.

If you remember that far back, or if you know the Sermon on the Mount, you remember that it starts with the Beatitudes, nine sayings, each of which begin with "Blessed are the," fill in the blank, and then a surprising twist. A reversal, like a baobab tree with what looks like its roots reaching into the sky. It's an upside-down version of the world, a glimpse into the kingdom, the kin-dom, the way God is remaking the world through Christ.

On that day in February, I had a thought. I wondered if the rest of the Gospel of Matthew could be understood as an illumination of those enigmatic Beatitudes. For instance, the feeding of the multitude as an illustration of "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." So as we've been reading through Matthew, I've compared the list of beatitudes to each subsequent story, to see if there was a "match." And today, as we hear this perplexing parable about how the first will be last and the last will be first, keep this one in mind: Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

It's true that the bold usually get the goods. The early bird catches the worm, the saying goes. You snooze, you lose. I'm not throwing away my shot. The meek? Well, they throw away their shot, they miss the boat. Tough beans, they are losers. But this story about the latecomers getting equal pay offends our sense of fairness, as it must have offended the first disciples. They were the first disciples, after all. Immediately before Jesus tells this parable, Peter asks him for assurance that he'll be rewarded for giving up everything to follow Jesus. Just a few verses after this parable, the mother of James and John wants assurance that her sons will have positions of power in Christ's kingdom, one on his right hand and one on his left. Apparently, she wasn't listening when he said, for a third time, that in Jerusalem he would be condemned to death, tortured, and crucified. I don't think she was asking for her sons to be on Jesus' right and his left on Calvary.

The story especially offends our sense of fairness if we identify with the workers who started at 6 am and made an agreement to receive a fair day's wage for working all day. Day laborers have it tough. The work is often difficult and dangerous, with a high rate of injury on the job and no medical insurance. Employers might give them bad checks, or even vanish when the work is done. If the workers are undocumented, they have no recourse. Now, this story has a very different sort of employer. But if he is going to capriciously pay everyone the same wage, no matter how long or short they worked, what's fair about that?

But Jesus is not telling this story to teach vineyard owners, or contractors, or any others who employ day laborers how to run their business. Like so many of his parables, it has a twist to make all its listeners think. This isn't a story about fair labor practices. It's a story about the kingdom of heaven. Where it's not those who hustle who get to be first. Rather, those who are overlooked, those deemed

less important, those left on the side of the road but for the generosity of a stranger, are elevated. The least of these brothers and sisters receive grace in God's economy. This is a story to teach us about grace that makes no calculations, for that is the nature of grace.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Grace is, by definition, undeserved. Freely given. Goodness, generously bestowed. Unearned. Unwarranted. Incalculable.

Grace is, we learn in Christ, in the nature of God. Full of mercy and abundant in love. The song calls it "amazing," and that's true because it's not at all what we expect. We expect judgment, and instead God offers forgiveness. We expect condemnation, and God offers love.

It is the meek who are most surprised by grace, and the most grateful for grace. Grace overturns the cruelty of the world, in favor of the marginalized. Grace reveals God's favor toward the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable, the sinners, the sick, and the suffering.

Keep going with this list of who God favors, be honest about your own vulnerability and neediness, turn aside from your quest for power and prestige, and pretty soon we're all in it together. We're all in need of grace, even those who got up early to earn our way in the vineyard. Thank God we have a generous landowner who wants to make sure we all have enough.

In this pandemic time, I believe we have a calling to grow in grace. To receive and to give, to be more like Christ as we become more aware of others' needs. For as disciples of Christ, we are to let his grace flow through us toward those who are in a world of hurt. We're all being tested by the unfairness of this virus and the disruptions it has caused. People are testy. Should we respond in kind? No, offer them grace. People are lonely. Offer them grace. People are scared. Offer them grace. People are behaving badly. Offer even them grace. We can name our own neediness and then look around for those in greater need, and be channels for God's amazing grace to heal the world. That's how they'll know we are Christians, by the love and grace we spill into the world.

In the last few weeks, we have celebrated three infant baptisms. You will see the third in a few minutes and be asked to participate by answering the congregational questions, promising to guide and nurture these children by word and deed, with love and prayer. One of the places in the baptism service which is especially meaningful to me is the prayer for the person being baptized which immediately follows the baptism itself. It goes like this:

O Lord, uphold this child by your Holy Spirit.  
Give her the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord,  
the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever.

The prayer comes from Isaiah 11, in which the prophet tells of the coming of Messiah. We believe that it describes Jesus Christ, so we are praying for Christ's spirit in all its fullness to dwell in the one being baptized.

That is a prayer we might renew for ourselves. Lord, give me the spirit of wisdom and understanding. Help me know what is right in this time like none other I've ever lived through before. Give me the spirit of counsel and might. Guide me as I make decisions that will affect others. Give me the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Amid all the conflicting voices of this world, help me

discern truth and keep faith in you, O God. Give me the spirit of joy in your presence. When the usual sources of comfort and happiness are stripped away, help me to see that you are always near, and find joy in you. When we pray this for ourselves, we are renewing our baptism. We are asking, once again, for that sign and seal of the covenant of grace.

My friends, we've come this far by faith. At the end of the day, God has always provided what we need. The kingdom of heaven is like an employer who gives his employees not what they've earned, but what they need. And what we all need is grace. God's fountain of grace is unending, for you and me and all the world God loves. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

May we become the people of grace Christ calls, gifts, and empowers us to be. By his Spirit, for the sake of the world God loves. Amen.