

Sermon: No One Really 'Likes' Grace
September 21, 2014
Peace Lutheran Church
Pastor Tom Miller

“NO ONE REALLY ‘LIKES’ GRACE!”

There was a golf tournament in Knoxville, Tennessee that had a fascinating ending. It was a hole-in-one tournament. The rules said that whoever came closest to getting a hole-in-one on the 90-yard hole was the winner. You didn't have to actually make a hole-in-one to win. Just be close.

One man hit a terrible shot. It was so bad that it ricocheted off the scorer's tent, bounced down the cart path and into the fairway, then hopped off a sprinkler head before finally coming to rest one inch from the cup.

Another golfer, meanwhile, stepped up to the tee, hit a beautiful shot that headed for the cup, hit the pin on the fly, bounced backward and stopped six inches from the cup.

So who was the winner? The golfer who made that beautiful straight on shot or the one who was so bad that he ricocheted his shot off the scorer's tent?

The man whose shot bounced off the scorer's tent, the cart path and the sprinkler head walked away with the prize.

It was the rule. The golfer closest to the cup was the winner.

Some things just aren't fair!! From our birth to our death, our common cry is "It isn't fair!!" It just keeps popping up. It pops up for Jonah. It pops up for the disciples. It pops up in the parable. It is common to our life.

WHEN WE LOOK AT LIFE, AND AT THE GOSPEL, WE FIND THAT WE DON'T EXPECT GOD TO BE TOO DIFFERENT FROM US. WE WANT FAIRNESS. WE EXPECT THAT GOD TOO WILL BE FAIR!!

So, what's the problem, you say? The problem is we get fixated on fairness. Our attention to fairness is an overwhelming driver for life. And that creates this: we are totally blind to and totally miss the point of the kingdom!!!

I get such a kick out of the story of Jonah. By this point in the story he's tried to run away and spent a few nights in a big fish. Now, Jonah does his job: he marches into Nineveh and announces the Lord's goodness, then turns around, marches back out. Then sits and pouts. He's pouting, you see, because it isn't fair. He's pouting, he says, because he knew God would not be fair, because God would be way too generous for the people.

But God prods!! A tree, shade, a worm, heat. God keeps poking at Jonah. Then raises the question, about what are you concerned—the tree, for which you had no interest, or the people for whom I have interest to save?

The same problematic focus shows up in the vineyard. The workers became so concerned with “fairness”, that they missed the generosity of the kingdom. They missed the nature of the kingdom concern for all, even those left without work till the end of the day. They missed the values and graces that are bigger than economic, cultural or human sense of fairness.

My humanity, our humanity, isn't much different. Becoming overwhelmingly focused on self, fairness, what we get or don't get, what we have or don't have, what other get or have or don't get or have, we miss what God is doing and God's kingdom work. We miss the power of grace poured out right in front of us.

The result of this overwhelming focus can lead us to what some call a “preference driven life”, that is a life driven by what seems right and fair to ME. It becomes about getting my share, doing what I want or enjoy and rewarding my ego needs. The focus is on me and my sense of what is right and good.

A kingdom driven life is the counter point. The Kingdom is about purpose, the bigger picture the needs of the greater body. Kingdom life is about the work that needs to get done and about those who are busy doing that work, no matter when they happen to join the work crew. The Kingdom focus is open to what God is seeking to do, specifically how I and we are instruments (our hands) to do, be and become (God's Work) that no one else can do in this time and place!

This center takes the focus away from fairness. It takes attention away from whether one is first or last. Ultimately it doesn't matter. For the kingdom is about doing what needs to be done in and for the kingdom, when it needs to be done in and for the kingdom. And the focus is not on “fair” but on God's grace and generosity with the reward coming in the kingdom time, no matter how long it takes.

A Sunday school superintendent was registering two new sisters in Sunday School. When she asked them how old they were one replied, "We're both seven. My birthday is April 8th and my sister's is April 20th."

That superintendent replied, "That's impossible girls."

The other sister then spoke up and said, "No it's true, one of us is adopted."

"Oh," the superintendent said, "Which one?" The two sisters looked at each other and one said, "We asked Dad that question awhile ago, but he just looked at us and said that he loved us both equally, so much so that

he couldn't remember which one of us was adopted." ("God's Little Lessons on Life for Women", Honor Books)

Oh, friends, that's what these stories are about, that's what our faith is about. God is the God of grace and generosity, not because we've earned it or deserve it, not because we are first or last, not because it looks or doesn't look fair. God's grace is a kingdom purpose that lays claim on us no matter where we are in life.

But even having said that, even believing and knowing that, there is something in our human psyche that doesn't really like "grace." There is something in our human that goes against this kind of generosity, this kind of abundance, especially if it looks like it is directed to someone other than me. Oh, as long as it is fair and just and I get what I've worked hard for, I'm all for it.

So, for most of us, it is pretty easy to identify with the all-day laborers in the parable Jesus told. We join them in thinking that they got a "raw deal", that life isn't fair, that hard work wasn't justly rewarded. We fall into line rather quickly with those, like Peter, who question Jesus about life's twists and turns that violate our sense of justice, fairness and equality.

Certainly, the actions of the vineyard owner in this parable are unfair. They would be fought tooth and nail by any union grievance committee. But this parable is not about labor relations. It isn't about justice. It isn't even about fairness. It is about the gift of grace. Jesus is trying to teach about the overwhelming fact of God's abundance and the inexhaustible fountain of God's grace.

Understand this, we're all 11th hour workers. The 11th hour workers were those who were too lame, too old, too slow, too burdened to be there earlier. They weren't the hale and hardy, the strong and virile who got there early. But they had the same families to support, the same bills to pay. By the 11th hour (5 p.m.) they were desperate, desperate just to get something to show their families that cared for and love.

So we are those 11th hour workers, broken and sinful, empty and desperate for God's grace and love and a word of hope and forgiveness.

Amen.