

“IT’S ALL ABOUT GRACE!”

The 19th Sunday After Pentecost
Pr. 21 A

September 28, 2014

Peace Lutheran
Grass Valley, CA

Teaching Points:

- 1) Faith Question: What’s Fair?
- 2) We can be glad God isn’t “fair”.
- 3) Faith is ultimately about God’s grace and authority.

“Justice is when we get what we deserve.

Mercy is when we don’t get what we deserve.

Grace is when we get what we don’t deserve.”

The Lutheran Pastor was well known as an avid golfer. One exceptionally wonderful Sunday morning, he just had to play golf. Feigning sickness, he convinced the Associate Pastor to lead worship. As soon as the Associate Pastor left the room, the pastor headed to a golf course about forty miles away.

Setting up on the first tee, he was alone and far enough from his parish no one would know.

About this time, Saint Peter leaned over to God. "Are you going to let him get away with this?"

God sighed. "No, I guess not."

About then, the Pastor hit the ball and it shot straight towards the pin, dropping just short of it, rolled up and fell into the hole.

It was a 420-yard hole-in-one!

St. Peter was astonished. "Why did you let him do that?"

God smiled. "So, who's he going to tell?"

Every so often, I have asked people to list their “big faith questions.” It doesn’t seem to matter when or where I ask the question, the top questions have to do with God’s justice. They come out like, “why do bad things happen to good people? And/or “Why does God reward those who live His will JUST LIKE THOSE, who don’t seem to be following God?”

Not only are questions about God’s justice and fairness, just as we saw last week, fairly common, they are also ancient.

The people of Ezekiel’s time asked it in this way, “Why are the children suffering for the sins of their parents?” They wanted to blame the sins of their ancestors for the exile into Babylon. They wanted to use some old memory as justification for their thoughts. They asked why sin isn’t always punished and righteousness isn’t always rewarded.

From what they saw, there seemed to be a huge gap between the lives of those who had good things happen, and those who had bad things happen – a non-sensical gap.

Yet, when God gets wind of all of this, God invites Ezekiel to rethink things. God suggests that it is really human ways that are unfair. God's ways are not just, but merciful and graceful. God desires that all should live. God desires that human kind would turn and believe in Him. God desires that grace be abundant and poured out rather than justice and fairness.

As a matter of fact, we can be glad that God isn't fair. We can be glad that God isn't just. For, you see, fairness and justice are really about getting what one has coming to them. Fairness and justice has to do with what we've earned in God's sight, what we deserve out of our own being our own actions. It has to do with what is fair in light of what I've done, the choices I've made, and the record I've kept. It is a strict balance sheet. A "if...then" formula. When things are in that kind of a category, then there is a price to pay. When we get what we have coming to us, well, then it can be ugly.

Thankfully, then God isn't fair. God isn't just. God isn't treating, blessing us, and weighing bad things against bad people, unfortunate circumstances against unfortunate people. Thankfully " . . . God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

You see:

Justice is when we get what we deserve.

Mercy is when we don't get what we deserve.

Grace is when we get what we don't deserve.

Ezekiel, and Jesus, are trying to take the focus off fairness and justice and putting it on grace. They are trying to make the first action God's not ours. They bring to bear the generosity of the giver, not the merit of the receiver. They make it all about grace!! Because ultimately, that's what it is about. Grace!!

One thing I've learned about God's grace is that it is always sufficient for the need. It is just what is necessary – never any more; never any less. Just a gift big enough to meet the need.

Think of it this way. The Golden Gate Bridge would be an inappropriate structure to span the Missouri River in Omaha Nebraska. Like wise, a grand display of God's power would be inappropriate for every circumstance. God's grace matches the need. Whether our lives are a dried up gulch, a raging river or a vast bay, God's grace is sufficient to help us make the passage, not because we've earned it or deserve it, but because God is full of grace. God's grace is sufficient to accompany us in getting a life giving new heart and new spirit. God's grace is always sufficient, always enough.

When we sort it all out (and didn't I pick some good weeks with fun readings to start my ministry with you?), the questions directed to Jesus have to do with whether or not Jesus had the authority to provide the gifts of grace needed to bring this new life, this new heart, this new deeper and deepening relationship with our Savior and Lord. It

has to do with whether or not Jesus has authority to turn the tables, to reverse what is backward and awful, to provide renewal and hope.

As they went out of church one Sunday morning the little girl shook the Pastor's hand and said, "I like the 'Amen' part. I like the 'amen' part because it means that I can go home now.

Well, "amen" doesn't really mean that.

"Amen" is a "yes" to God's generosity. In fact, God's generosity demands an "amen", maybe a good Baptist AMEN! Not a let's get out of here kind of 'amen'. But a "Let's get to work!!" 'amen' that reflects a changed heart and a changed spirit, a recognition of Jesus authority, Jesus power.

Let's be clear. Justice is about reprimand. Grace is about invitation. Justice is about what is deserved, Grace is about the generosity of the giver.

Today, Jesus looks at us and says: "I'm not necessarily impressed that you said, "Amen." But neither am I concerned that you didn't. I am not worrying how much you did or did not do (justice). I am inviting you to follow me now (grace). I am inviting you to take a turn to me for your life (grace)!"

I don't know how you feel today. Maybe you feel pretty unworthy. Maybe you really blew it is week. Maybe you're plodding through life thinking you are getting what you deserve. Maybe you' don't have any idea about how to break the cycle that will get you to God's love and grace.

Jesus says, "None of that concerns me! I think you're worthy. I want you to be with me. I want you to know that yesterday's refusals are not nearly as important as today's willingness. Last year's closed mindedness is not nearly as important as this year's openness. Last month's no isn't nearly as life changing as today's 'yes'."

The line in the parable I find most comforting and challenging is the one about the first son. After he rejected his father's request, "He changed his mind." That's a small verse, but it gives breathing space. I can take a deep breath in the presence of that verse; it assures me that until I die, nothing is fixed and locked in. I don't have to continue in some of the ways I have followed; I can change, a new start is possible. I hear a chance to "change my mind".

In the end it is all about God's authority to be full of grace. It is God's invitation to new life, to say a big "amen" -- not so you can get out of here, but so you can begin to walk in His light, and serve as His light for all of creation.

Know his grace to be sufficient for your day and life!
Amen.