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“Extravagant Graciousness”

Philippians 1:27 – 2:7a
Matthew 20:1 – 16

Text: “For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for Him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” . . . Philippians 1:29 – 30

Some of you know that I was the third child in an otherwise two child family. I came along 15 years after Louise, my oldest sister, and 10 years after Carolyn entered the world. My dad was 47 when I was born and my mother was 37. That was fairly extraordinary back in day of coal-fired furnaces and no TVs. As my mother told me when I was in seminary, I was the best mistake she ever made. Some of you may disagree with her assessment.

But there were advantages. I had two older sisters to both baby-sit and spoil me. When my mother died about 9 years ago I realized in a conversation with my sisters how jealous they were of all the attention I got. I never noticed that – “all that attention” seemed perfectly natural to me. And while I got the benefits of their babysitting and special presents – I actually thought they enjoyed doing it!

Somehow this fits into today’s Gospel lesson. But before we get there, let’s recap where we are in discovering where we are in discovering family life as God would like for us to enjoy it.

Last week we examined two aspects of family living. The first was just who is our family? Of course, immediately coming to mind is the family we currently are in, or at least grew up in. But we also considered that since God created the whole world and all that is in it, we should understand that all people all across the world are a part of our family.

The second thing we talked about last week was how forgiveness is needed in a family, especially the global family. And we didn’t gloss over how hard is it to forgive; but we also recognized that Jesus when He died on the cross, Jesus forgave the sins of all. We also looked at several Biblical accounts of forgiveness that says if we don’t forgive, we will not receive forgiveness from God.

This week we look at another passage. It has to do with God’s extravagant grace; how to live and share it; and as a side-effect, how others receive grace and perhaps the envy it causes in us.

An old “Family Circus” comic strip shows the two young brothers Jeff and Billy squabbling over the size of the slices of pie their mom has placed before them. “They aren’t the same,” Jeff pouts. Mom tries again, evening-up the slices. Still Jeff is upset. “They still aren’t the same!” he whines. This time Mom uses a ruler and absolutely

proves that both slices of pie are the exact same size. “But Mom,” Jeff complains, “I want mine to be just like Billy’s . . . only bigger!”

We all tend to think we deserve a bigger slice of the pie. From the time we are little children, we are taught that doing more is worth more. Did you get an allowance as a child, that weekly “reward” for doing the chores that were your responsibility? If so, you probably had your allowance and the amount of work you did to “earn” that allowance go up as your age did. Right?

Chores and allowances teach children that in this world’s economy we have to do work in order to receive our “rewards.” We want our kids to learn and to live the adage, “Hard work pays off.”

But that’s not the message of today’s Gospel lesson. And that is why the parable in today’s gospel text is so unsettling. This is one of those Scriptures that, quite frankly, just doesn’t fit with our culture. In our culture we value highly a “you get what you deserve” kind of mentality – whether it’s grades in school, or pay at work. This story puts a finger – and none to gingerly – on that most common human experience, the sense that others have gotten more than they deserve and that we have not received what is rightly ours.

And yet, this is a parable about grace. But the grace doesn’t necessarily seem to be grace for us – or at least with the ones in this story with whom we identify. It’s grace for other people. People who, from our sense of fair play and justice, seem to be less worthy than us. And this grace is so extravagant that it is almost incomprehensible.

Let’s look a little more closely at the parable.

Jesus tells of a landowner who went out to hire workers. This is not unusual in Jesus’ day. And, it’s not unusual in our day – there are places where manual laborers gather today and wait for contractors to come and hire them for the day or job. Back then, many land-owners did not have enough workers to handle the seasonal jobs that needed to be done in the fields. The work was especially heavy when a new field was being developed, the vineyards needed to be pruned, and especially during the harvest season. It was necessary for owners to find temporary workers to help with these seasonal tasks.

Such workers were largely unskilled and desperate for work. They would hang out in the town square trying to find any work that would prevent them from having to beg for their food. The landowner went into town and hired workers early in the morning, then at noon, again in the mid-afternoon, and finally one hour before the end of the work day.

In this story, the landowner and the first group of workers had a contractual agreement. The rest of the workers assumed they were going to be paid fairly.

When the day ended, the landowner lined up the workers, and began with the last to be hired, who received a full day’s pay for their measly one hour of work. If you were one of those workers, you experienced extravagant grace! However, having seen what had happened, the first workers hired – who worked all day long including the scorching heat of the day, also received the same full day’s pay, just as they had agreed to in the contractual agreement they made with the owner at the beginning of the day. If it wasn’t for the fact that it was the same amount received as the one hour workers, they probably

would have been very satisfied. But why should they work 12 hours and receive the same amount of pay as the ones that came and only worked 6 hours, 3 hours, or especially the ones that only worked one hour?!?

It is easy to identify with the grumbling guys who worked sunup to sundown, through the heat of the day, and then watched in amazement as the Johnny-come-lately workers who worked for one measly hour, in the cool of the approaching evening no less, got paid a full day's wage. Of course the full day worker EXPECTS more. Of course the full day worker SHOULD get more. It is only fair. More work should equal more wages. "Hard work pays off."

I always identify with the full day workers, and I tend to identify with the elder son in the story of the prodigal son. Like them, I think of my life as I would my work. And I have worked hard for my wage. I do a lot of measuring and comparing. Like in Joseph Heller's book *Catch 22*, I line up separate columns, "feathers in my cap" and "black eyes". I exult that "I am far advanced in my field." And at the next moment I moan that "there are others even younger than I who are even further advanced." (again, quoting from *Catch 22*).

My suspicion is that if we find ourselves identifying with the ones hired at the beginning of the day and who "have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" we will find ourselves disturbed by this parable. We think of all the times we have come early and stayed late, all the committees we have served on, all the work we have undertaken, and say, "it's not fair! I deserve more!"

Well . . . knowing the Bible as we do, what makes it worse is that is probably just what Jesus intended.

What is God up to anyway? I work so hard and so long and *they* seem to work so little. Why should they get as much, or even more, than me? Ah, envy. Socrates called envy "the ulcer of the soul." And more than I care to admit, I have experienced envy gnawing within me.

Sometime I ago I was discussing this parable at a Bible Study Retreat that I led and one person observed how pervasive economic criteria and its ways of evaluating almost everything are. There is value in hard work. There is value in fair play. The focus is single mindedly on a "you get what you deserve" calculus. After all, the best we can do in our human societies is simply fair play, so trying to understand God's grace is almost incomprehensible to us.

But I think what Jesus is trying to point out is that when we do that some truth about ourselves and some element of our humanity seems to be at risk.

Paul understands this and said in his Letter to the Church at Philippi, "And this is God's doing. since you are having the same struggle you saw I had and now hear that I still have. . . . Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

Whew! It's nice to know that Paul struggles with this also!

You see, the Lord enters into relationship with each person. There is no "general contract," only covenants entered into with each person. I do not need to know the conditions or motivations affecting anyone's deal but mine.

Let's face it we still live in a bookkeeping world. And in this parable God is showing us that those ledger books are ignored forever. There is no debit on your ledger that can keep you out of the embrace of God's love. There is no minimum balance below which will make you ineligible for God's grace. For if the world could have been saved by bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses, not Jesus.

When our only measure is fairness, when our preoccupation is to be sure that we get our just desserts, we lose touch with God's sense of grace and graciousness. And it's hard to be loving in any family – biological or God's family when we feel we have been slighted.

What does it mean to live a life of grace as a part of God's family? We forget about the people who love us more than we deserve, and the God who has extended generosity and forgiveness to each of us.

God's thoughts are not our thoughts. And God's actions are not our actions. And sometimes what we read about God's nature is almost incomprehensible to us. The vineyard owner sums it up for us, "Do you begrudge Me My generosity?" And if you're at all like me, often the answer is usually, "Yes, I do." I begrudge anyone getting more than I do when by *my* measure they have done less. No, I do not think in terms of God's generosity. I only think in what *I* understand to be fair play. Not only am I human, but I'm so human – as I suspect you are – that I'm not sure I even know what it means to think in terms of God's generosity.

Perhaps the most difficult thing about this parable is that it says to us that the bad news is that there is only Good News! Everyone gets God's grace! The only judgment here is the *judgment people impose upon themselves* because they have trouble *with others* receiving God's grace!

But I suspect that someday, if it already hasn't happened to us, or even if it isn't true for us now, someday we will appreciate being the recipient of the same amount of God's love that even a Mother Teresa receives. And then we will know that not only is God's love and grace nearly incomprehensible, but also pretty amazing.

Life is not fair, thank God! And as Christians, we discover it's not fair because it's rooted in grace.