

ESSENTIALS - Kirsten Anonby

Grace (pt. 2) | Matthew 20:1-16 | March 7, 2021

INTRODUCTION

When I think about what it's like to become a Christian it's a lot like becoming a part of a different country. Even though we're still living in and amongst the old world, our citizenship has changed. We have become a part of a new Kingdom called "The Kingdom of God," and many assumptions and ways of approaching the world no longer apply.

But it's difficult to wrap our head around this new citizenship, especially when everyone around us is still following the old rules. And that's why Jesus tells us story after story to help us grasp what this new kingdom is like - like this story today of the workers in the vineyard. You'll notice that Jesus begins the story by saying "the kingdom of heaven is like . . ." He's painting a picture for us of what this new kingdom is like - and what the king is like who rules it.

Our story today is an edgy one - Luke talked about this same text last week and did such a great job of showing how it challenges our assumptions about how God and the world work. My first response to this story is perhaps like yours - frustration that the people who had worked so hard all day didn't get more. They have a right to complain, I agree, when they get the same pay as the latecomers.

And that's how we are supposed to respond to this story. Notice that Jesus even makes it so the people who worked last were paid first - to raise the expectation that earlier workers will get more. Jesus has designed this story to make us angry—to stir up our sense that life should be fair, that effort should be rewarded, and that some people deserve more than others.

Why does he do that?

I think he tells this story like he does because he wants us to take a good hard look at the emotions it makes us feel --- these emotions that feel like noble ones - anger at what we would call unfair treatment- frustration that Jesus isn't rewarding hard work. He us wants to

look at them because the assumptions behind those feelings are what get in the way of us accepting His grace.

And that in itself can be a difficult concept for us to wrap our heads around. What's difficult about receiving grace? Whoever found it difficult to accept something that's freely given? Could anyone be offended by grace? Jesus shows us here, in this parable, that "yes, indeed, we can, and we are."

It can be difficult to extend grace to others.

It can be difficult to receive it ourselves.

But at the same time we desperately need it, and we are longing for the kind of community – the kind of world -- that is shaped by the grace of God.

I want to spend the rest of our time exploring what it looks like to switch countries—to let go of our assumptions about how the world works –that rise up in us when we read this parable.

I want to explore what it looks like to live, instead, in a kingdom of grace.

What's it Like to Live in a Kingdom of Grace?

Our First Experience of Grace

When we think of grace what often comes to mind is when we first accepted it:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. – Ephesians 2:8-9a

- *We think of that moment when we discovered, to quote Paul in Ephesians 2, that we had been saved by grace through faith. And that this had nothing to do with our own effort, but was a gift, freely given by God simply because we believed and wanted to live with Him and for him.*
- *We think of that moment when we learned that our past was not going to stain and destroy our future—because it was forgiven.*
- *We think of that moment when it became real to us that what Jesus had done had paid for what we had done . . . and that we were free.*

I remember when I was a young adult it was hard for me to feel grateful for Jesus' gift of grace. I knew I should feel grateful, but the truth was that I hadn't done anything yet in my life

that really horrified me (which was, I suspect, more because of an undeveloped conscience than a particularly godly life).

But time and my own brokenness fixed this problem, and I did carry guilt for things that horrified me - that I couldn't believe I had done. In that time the picture that I had was that I was a tightrope walker - like in a circus. I was a tightrope walker who had slipped and was falling. And everything I knew about grace and God's forgiveness was like those giant nets that they place underneath tightrope walkers. I fell into the net of God's grace—and His free gift of forgiveness became the clearest expression of His love for me. Because my future was not going to be destroyed by my past. I was not marked by sin - I was marked by my identity as a child of God. I knew the beauty of being given a free gift that I did NOT deserve.

This time in my life was a conversion moment - the first profound experience of receiving God's grace. I will never forget it.

But what's funny to me is how many times since then I have discovered myself trying to impress God, or have caught myself acting and thinking like I had to clean myself up before I came to God. Or - the many times I've found myself comparing myself to others to make myself feel good. . . . or bad.

Over the years I've discovered that I need to be transformed by grace again, and again, and again. And it's not just because I need to be forgiven. I do need to be forgiven all the time, but I also need to be reminded that grace involves an entirely different way of thinking about myself, about others, and about God.

I've realized that grace is not just something that got me into the Kingdom - it's a part of the Kingdom that needs to get into me.

And that, I suspect, is a lifelong process.

This is what happens, though, when grace begins to permeate the way we live.

Grace Enables us to Receive Love and be Known

Years ago I lived within walking distance of Granville Island, and I would go there to journal and hangout with Jesus. On one of those days I was reflecting on the fact that I always needed to make sure I was giving more than I was receiving in my closest

relationships. This made me feel safe in my relationships – and it made me feel kind of noble. In that moment, though, Jesus showed me that there was a terrible poverty to this way of living. I felt a tremendous grief, grief for myself when Jesus showed me how little I was allowing myself to be loved.

This was the beginning of a long journey of learning to be messy with people – to move beyond my fears and actually ask for what I needed. It is when I learned that a part of love was to let myself to be in the debt of those who loved me best.

This too was a journey into grace.

We learn very quickly in life to perform. We learn how to please people, how to impress them. We learn how to climb the ladder of prestige, or popularity, wealth, or power. Or maybe we spiritualize it and climb the ladder of virtue.

Whatever ladder we climb, we're on our guard against everyone else -- ultimately driven by the fear of what it will mean if we don't climb high enough—higher than others. We fear what failure might mean about who we are, and what we're worth.

As we journey into God's grace, He unmakes this learning.

Jesus is constantly reminding us that we are accepted and worthy because of what He has done, not because of what we have done. He constantly brings us back to the reality that we don't have to perform for Him, because He already knows the ugliest parts of us -- and He loves us anyway. So we can be fully ourselves with Him. We can be our needy, messy selves, because, let's face it – it's not new to him.

And over time we can learn to be fully ourselves with others. Because the fact that others are broken isn't new to us either.

Jesus meant for the church to be a place where we could learn to receive grace from one another. Where we could learn that to be in another's debt doesn't mean that we have fallen several rungs down on the ladder of competition. It means that we get to

learn at a deeper level that even in the midst of our ugliness and our brokenness we can be loved. We are loved.

We as people are both terrified of a community that is authentic in sharing brokenness, and we're dying for community that is authentic in sharing brokenness.

But that is a community of grace. It's what we want to be.

Grace Enables us to be Free

The interaction Jesus has with the disciples after the parable of the workers in the vineyard carries very much the same message, and it shows how much the disciples really hadn't understood what Jesus was saying.

In it we meet the mother of James and John - possibly the first ever documented helicopter parent. She comes to Jesus and asks if her boys can sit in the places of honour at Jesus' right and left.

Jesus looks at the two guys and their mom and says "you have no idea what you're asking - are you able to drink the bitter cup that I'm going to drink?" (Jesus, only moments before, had described, for the third time, how he was going to die). But the two guys, with all the exuberance that comes from having no clue - say "yes we can!" - They want those positions of honour.

When the rest of the disciples hear about this they're indignant. And Jesus realizes that all of them have completely missed the point. They're acting like there's only so much of God's favor to go around - but there is always enough of God's favor to go around.

So He gathers them together to explain, as clearly as possible, what it means to participate in the Kingdom of God:

"You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to

be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.” - Matthew 20:25-28

“But among you” - Jesus says - “it must be different.”

You know, I don't think the fullest expression of following this passage is for us to take the last place in every line, or to always yield to others. I don't think that's what Jesus is getting here.

I think what Jesus is saying is that our position no longer matters.

Jesus is trying to get his disciples to see that the whole system based on competition, effort, and fairness - this whole system that the world lives by—is broken.

It's broken because it's based off the assumption of a broken world - that there is never enough - never enough money—never enough food -never enough favour—never enough love.

But because of the radical, self-giving love of our Jesus - who gave everything for us This is no longer true. It may still be true in the world, but it isn't true with Jesus. There is always abundance. There is always enough.

This is what it means to live God's kingdom of grace. As we spend time with Jesus, as the reality of His grace sinks down deep into our hearts, we become free. We become free celebrate when the landowner is gracious to the workers who came in the final hour. We become free to be last because Jesus has already given us the highest honour. He's taken us, as we are, when we had nothing to offer Him, washed us and made us clean, and called us His own.

We become free to live as citizens of a new country—the Kingdom of God.

Of course, we are living in this new way in the midst of a world that is entirely ordered by the old way of being. And so there sometimes are real costs for us to letting go of our ladders of competition. But in the end it is Jesus' kingdom that will be the eternal

final thing. And here, today, we have the chance to live like citizens of God's country. And when we do that we have a chance to give others a taste of what they desperately need - the grace of God.

Practices that Help us to Grow Deeper into Grace

Experiencing the grace of God is, of course, ultimately a work of God's Spirit. But these rhythms are ones that put us in a place where it's easy for God to work the truth of grace deeper into our lives.

Confession and Forgiveness

Confession is simply the act of confessing our sin. It is the act of acknowledging our brokenness - saying out loud the ways that we have not been who we should have been: either by what we have done, or by what we have failed to do.

We should confess our sin to Jesus regularly. This simple act of saying out loud the ways we've wronged God, others, and even ourselves - is tremendously freeing.

And it is the most freeing when we confess our sins to another person: not to everyone - but to someone. Because then we get to be Jesus to one another. We get to look one another in the eye with the love of Jesus in our hearts - and we get to say "you are forgiven." This is what it means to bring something to the light - and it's tremendously freeing. It's joyful, in fact.

We had a family time of confession with our kids recently - and the end result was joy - the kids at the end were galloping around the living room because they'd gotten some things off their chests and they were feeling free. It was beautiful.

Forgiveness is just as important: it is the act of extending to someone else what we have so graciously received from God.

The longer I live and the more hurt I see in the world, the more I recognize that forgiveness is a work of God in our lives. He is the one that enables us to release what we feel when someone has hurt us. When someone continues to hurt us.

Forgiveness does not mean that we completely restore relationship with one who has hurt us. But it does mean that we release our right to anger, to resentment, to bitterness, to revenge. And it means that we can once again be free.

Sabbath and Play

If you are trying to move away from competition & achievement and towards trust, there is no better place to start than with Sabbath and play.

Sabbath was meant to remind us that we are not only doers, but be - ers
It reminds us that everything that we have is not because we earned it, but because of the goodness of God.

And so for us to Sabbath, for us to leave our work and to engage with play - is an act of trust. We trust that God made us for both work and rest - and we grow in our capacity to receive both as a gift.

Years ago, David had a pastor named Harvey Trotter who used to say "God's not just trying to see what He can get out of us." We remind each other that this is the heart of God.

Our God is not a taskmaster - He is a Father.
And He has come that we might have life, and have it to the full.

May we live in the abundance and fullness of His grace.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What did God's grace first become real to you?
- How do you think the grace of God needs to further permeate your life?
- Do a bit of dreaming about our church community and/or your life group. What would it look like if it was further permeated and shaped by the grace of God?
- How have confession and forgiveness been a part of your life of faith? How would you like to grow in these practices?

- How do sabbath and play help us to more fully experience God's grace? How would like to grow in these practices?
- In what ways do you think Jesus is further inviting you to experience His grace?