

Pentecost 16

Pure Grace

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Christ the King, Kenner

Texts: Philippians 1:21 & Matthew 20:1-16 & Jonah 3:10-4:11

I was fifteen years old. I was with a group of Lutheran teenagers on retreat. It was the end of the day, so we were all sitting around the campfire for evening devotions. Interspersed among the songs and prayers, one Bible verse was repeated several times. It was the opening verse of today's Second Reading. I had never heard it before, but it made a profound impression on me, so much so that I believe it was there that evening when I decided I wanted to study to become a pastor. In other words, I felt called through the Bible verse, which we all heard a few minutes ago. Philippians 1:21, where St. Paul says, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." But I heard it first in the older English version, "for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

I understood it to mean that Christ gave himself for us that we might live for him. And that's when I started really listening to Scripture and gradually began to discover how radical God's grace is, how scandalous the Gospel can be.

We had a powerful example of it last night with the baptism of little Holden Orgeron. He was presented by his parents and godparents, too young to understand what was happening. But in baptism God took Holden to himself, made him his redeemed child, and promised to love him forever. And Holden

didn't have to say or do a thing. He, like all of us, is a recipient of God's grace.

God always takes the initiative.

There are some Christians who believe that baptism should be for believers who know what's happening and who are ready to make promises to God. But the majority of Christians, from the beginning, realize that it's God who makes the promises. It's a carry-over from the Old Testament in which Jewish boys were circumcised on the 8th day to become "benai berith" sons of the covenant, heirs of the promises God made to Abraham and his descendants. They were marked for life, from early on, as a reminder of God's faithfulness. In baptism we mark children with the sign of the cross as a reminder of God's loving faithfulness to them. And as they grow we help them discover that to live is Christ.

And part of that spiritual development brings us to a full appreciation for the grace of God. In today's Gospel Reading Jesus likened it to a landowner hiring day-laborers to work in his vineyard. Let's update it a bit. He drives up to the local Home Depot at 6:00 and asks a group of guys standing in the parking lot, "Who'd like to make \$80 working for me today?" And before you know it, five guys have jumped into the back of his pick-up. Three hours later he drives over to Lowes and sees some others standing around hoping for work. He tells them he'll pay them fare and square if they'll work for him that day. He does the same at noon and three. Even at 5:00 he hires some more.

An hour later he calls them all in from the field to be paid. And he starts paying them in cash, beginning with the Johnny-come-latelies who had only worked one hour and had hardly even broken a sweat. And everyone can see him hand each of them four \$20 bills, 80 bucks each. Wow! They didn't see that coming! When the next group approaches, he gives them the same, and keeps handing out \$80 to all of them including the guys who had been there since early in the morning.

Well, that's a good way to start a riot. And sure enough that last group complained that it wasn't fair to pay them all the same, when some hadn't worked as long as the others. But the owner said, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Or "do you begrudge my generosity?"). Yes they do.

But, of course, in the divine economy God doesn't give any of us what we deserve, what we've worked for. In that sense, God isn't fair. Not at all. Because we're the Johnny-come-latelies in the parable who are absolutely bowled over by God's generosity to us. My first words in heaven, after I've caught my breathe, will probably be something like, "I sure didn't deserve something like this!"

But then God's always full of surprises. As in today's Old Testament Reading from the book of Jonah. God had sent Jonah to Nineveh, the capital

city of Assyria, Israel's mortal enemy, to call the people to repentance. And the surprising thing is that they did, they did repent. And God spared them. And that really ticked Jonah off. "God, I knew you'd do something like this, that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. And this just proves it. It's like God always has a card up his sleeve, he's always ready to play the grace card.

When God saw Jonah pouting, he asked if it was right for him to be angry with God, it was as though the Lord were asking, "do you begrudge my generosity?"

How could we when it includes us. But God's love is so unconditional, he is so spendthrift with his grace, that the Good News is often scandalous.

Jesus calls a thieving tax collector, Mathew to be a disciple. And he's called us too. He forgave a prostitute telling the Pharisees, "whoever is without sin gets to throw the first stone," and he forgives us also. Jesus had mercy on his executioners, and he's merciful with us as well.

Let's pray that with little Holden we come to see that to live is Christ.

"Almighty and eternal God, you show perpetual lovingkindness to us your servants. Because we cannot rely on our own abilities, grant us your merciful judgment, and train us to embody the generosity of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord."