

Holding Out for Grace

Matthew 25:1-13, 1 Thess 5:1-11 by Patty Friesen (Nov. 19/23)

In our fall series on grace, we've been using Philip Yancey's 25th anniversary edition of his book *What's So Amazing about Grace*. The rock band U2 studied the book together and lead singer Bono wrote a concise review, "When you boil it down, the universe runs by either Karma - what goes around comes around or by Grace - forgiveness despite what we've done or who we are. I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. I'm holding out for Grace."

As we get close to Advent, Matthew's gospel ramps up its' end-times hopes for the second coming of Christ and the culmination of all things. Matthew's persecuted readers in the early church looked forward to Christ's coming again as they waited and waited and tried to live Christ's teachings in their present time. They didn't just wait for Jesus to save them, they practiced worship and hospitality and responded non-violently to their enemies in the Roman coliseum.

Readiness illustrated in lit lamps in Matthew's Gospel is, of course, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount. Many can do this for a short while; but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when hostilities break out time and time again and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for a day can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires tenacity, fortitude and resilience.

In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul describes the distinctiveness of the church—the distinctiveness of its hope and of its ethical life in the present. The present ethical life of the church is regulated by the events of the past (Jesus' death and resurrection) and the future (the second coming of Christ.) Paul's apocalyptic writings inspired hope, gave comfort, and provided challenge to the

persecuted early church as socially alienated persons of his day. Permanent union with the Lord in the future challenges believers to come together on earth right now.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words are as true today as they were years ago: "At eleven o'clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing 'In Christ there is no East or West,'" we stand in the most segregated hour of America." Eschatological battle is not a violent response to enemies but an invitation for us not to settle for an easy faith that leave many people still confined to the margins of existence. Thus, Paul's apocalyptic diction is not innocuous. It is radical and impinges on the quality of life lived in the present.

In many ways, it is reminiscent of the apocalyptic spirit found in the African-American spirituals. Although the spirituals were noted for their otherworldly orientation, they also had this-worldly functions. The slave's world was full of trouble, storms, and hard times, as the songs "Soon I Will Be Done," "Been in the Storm So Long," and "I Been Rebuked and I Been Scorned" attest. These songs expressed longing and hope for another world. Their this-worldly function, however, was the building up of community solidarity and the practice of a veiled form of critique of slavery and communication of escape. With an eye toward the future and yet with a challenge for community solidarity in their present circumstances, the slaves sang "Walk Together Children." In the songs "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Steal Away to Jesus," the slave likely engaged in covert communication, cryptically requesting or signaling the help of the "underground railroad" (the sweet chariot) to get "home" (the northern states or Canada).

I appreciate these New Interpreter's Commentary understandings of present day ethical living in this apocalyptic texts. I grew up with the terrifying end-times film *A Thief in the Night* about Christ coming for all the Christians and everyone else gets munched. I struggled with these texts interpreted as Christian triumphalism – we've got the truth and the lit lamps and the

foolish non-Christians so we'll be saved and no one else will. I struggled with the use of these texts to scare people into heaven.

The New Testament however, equates the day of the Lord with a new era already begun by Christ's first coming. Christians have always lived in the in-between times of Christ already come and Christ still coming. We are not to be worried about what God is doing as the world falls apart but rather focus on what **we** are doing – being oil in lamps and proclaiming grace and peace – particularly in desperate times when nations again resort to violence rather than peacemaking and grace as a strategy for resolving conflict.

Grace appears over 100 times in the Bible and this five-letter word is precisely what the world needs in contentious times. It takes little or no grace to relate to someone who thinks like us, votes like us, and looks and smells like us. Rather grace is put to the test when we confront someone different, especially someone who is morally offensive to us. As the Canadian theologian Lee Beach has said, "If you want to grow in love, the way to do it is not likely going to be by attending more Bible studies or prayer meetings, it will happen by getting close to people who are not like you." This is why I personally like volunteering at Friendship Inn because it reminds me of how the other half of Saskatoon lives.

What must it have been like for Jesus, who knew what God imagined for the human experiment to live amid people whose lives so miserably failed to match that ideal? And yet many of his parables present startling examples of grace. More, Jesus demonstrated grace in person, seeking out people in society who least resembled him: tax collectors, prostitutes, notorious sinners; the physical and spiritual outcasts.

At its most basic level, grace acts as a social lubricant, softening man interaction. Saying a simple please and thank you and have a nice day are like grace notes in music, such

embellishments add a subtle flavour of courtesy to our day. Take them away and social interactions have a harsher edge with the rude customer and the driver cutting us off. Apostle Paul urged us to bring comfort to the harsh world around us by giving gentle and respectful answers to the reason of hope that we have. Jesus followers can lead the way in helping to restore civility to a growing religious and cultural divide in Canada. . Like a time-release capsule, grace works on several levels: restoring basic, civility, transforming individuals, and ultimately affecting all of society.

“Perfect love casts out fear,” the apostle John wrote. Looking out over our current culture plagued by a variety of fears; transgendered people, immigrants, masks and vaccines - it appears that the converse of John’s statement is also true: Perfect fear casts out love. The more Christians are characterized by fear, the less we communicate grace Grace, like water, always flows to the low places. In the gospels, Jesus makes the point that although the world rewards worthy individuals like the religious and the rich, grace has nothing to do with worthiness. Like water, it flows downward, like a gift, it needs only to be received with open hands.

As though to underscore the point, the entire Bible shines a spotlight on deeply flawed individuals who have been transformed by the radical power of grace. Peter, who betrayed Jesus with a curse, not once but three times. Paul, the human rights abuse who once tortured Christians. These are the giants of faith, proving that no one can conclude, “I’m beyond the reach of God’s grace. God could never love someone like me.” Noah was a drunk. Sarah was too old to have children. Timothy was too young to be a minister. Moses, a great leader to be sure, but one who had an anger problem and committed murder. Jacob was a liar. Leah was rejected by her husband. Moses had a stutter. Gideon was afraid. Rahab was a prostitute.

David was an adulterer and murderer. Isaiah preached naked. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah were widows. Jonah was a runaway. Job was bankrupt. Martha was anxious. Paul was fundamentalist and Lazarus, well Lazarus was dead.

This should bring us comfort as we approach the God of grace in the coming of Christ for the first and the second time. To begin our series, we wrote our definitions of grace on a dry erase board in the church lobby and we said the following: grace is unrelentless awesomeness. Two people wrote grace is like rain (must have been farmers), another said it was like solar power (that must have been by someone who has panels!), others wrote reliable, constant safety, 2 people mentioned their pets and four others defined grace in relational terms – when someone gets me, saying I love you even in a fight, forgiveness in a marriage and forgiveness no matter what. Luke and I preached on the atrocious arithmetic of grace, on the tension between grace and justice in the book of Jonah, the eyes of grace with which we see our 2+LGBTQ Mennonite brothers and sisters and the arsenal of grace used by nations in non-violent political revolutions.

It's been neat to hear people referring to grace in casual conversations at church. Grace has become a part of our vocabulary and hopefully a renewed daily part of our faith. While our series on grace ends today, may our experience of it never end.

Let us pray...God, we are holding out for grace. We have no other hope than this indescribable gift that transforms our personal hearts and the hearts of groups and nations. We pray for this budding, this birthing and this revealing of your way in the world. We pray for it and ask for continued hope and confidence and signs that it is always coming and yet already here. Help us live into this reality. Amen.