**Jennifer Fry 9/12/20 It’s All About the Grace Mt 20: 1-16**

Most of you have children or grandchildren and I think you can probably relate to this: As my youngest nieces and nephews, grew older and had birthdays, my sister and I always bought a big gift for the birthday child and smaller gifts for the other children, because we didn’t want to leave anyone out. We wanted to be fair.

When the oldest turned 7 or 8, we both said, “this is ridiculous and expensive” and decided only one gift for the birthday child. With a little bit of trepidation, we arrived at the birthday party with only one gift. And you know what? Not a single one of them noticed. They were too busy helping the oldest open his presents or playing to notice they didn’t have anything to open. Our kids are great sharers, for the most part, so everyone had something new to play with for a while, and then they went back to running around, yelling, screaming, and sneaking cake or candy.

On the surface, our parable this week is about pay, and how much work you do for the same amount of pay as someone else. In my day job, I’m a recruiter for Crocs, the shoe company. We offer people jobs every day, and inevitably someone will say, “I’m making $13.50 an hour, but Joe is making $15.00 an hour for the same work, that’s not fair.”

Both of these stories are examples that fair is all about perception, not necessarily about facts. From the oldest’s second birthday on, our perception was that we were leaving the other kids out. Their reality was “hey, it’s a party and I get to play with my cousins and some new toys for a while”. For our friends at Crocs, their perception is, “Hey, I work as hard as Joe does, I deserve what you’re paying him.” In reality, Joe had far more experience and exceeded his goals each week. Our vineyard workers felt the same way. “It’s not fair that I started work at 6am, and they started work at 5pm, and we are getting the same pay. We worked far harder than they did.”

Perhaps the reality for our vineyard workers was that those who started last were as hungry as those who started first, and the landowner recognized that they all needed a denarius to feed their families that day.

You might think this parable is about being fair to each person. But parables aren’t meant to be that easy. Jesus used parables to make us think. He was a master story teller, and the imagery in his stories is often easy to imagine. In my mind, I can see a town square teeming with people who needed to work and feed their families. And a landowner who needed workers to get his crops in before the chill of the evenings would harm them. Or a business owner who needed to get his product out the door, so children everywhere could have presents to open on Christmas day.

This landowner was really not generous in his pay – he paid one denarius a day. That was about what it took to live on for one day in that time. There are a lot of opinions about how much that is today, but I think it’s roughly $20-25 per day. While he wasn’t generous, he did do a good thing. He may not have been generous with the pay, but he was generous in the number of people he hired. The landowner understood that we all deserve grace. The workers that came at the end of the day didn’t get what they deserved, they received his unearned and undeserved generosity, and that is at the heart of what grace is.

When it comes time to pay folks, they line up to be paid, he tells the manager to pay those who arrived last first. There was an excitement among the earlier workers as they saw those folks getting a denarius. Surely, because they worked hard and longer, they would get more. They didn’t. Every single person, regardless of time they arrived, was paid the same amount – one denarius. They were angry. They complained it wasn’t fair. And the landowners his response? “Did I not pay you what we agreed to?” He paid all of them the same, and that was agreed upon before he ever sent them to the fields. He also said, “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” And it all comes down to that generosity.

Having grown up in the Methodist Church, and really becoming familiar with and understanding John Wesley’s concept of grace, I think it’s very fair to say, I am a Wesleyan Christian. As Christians, as people of Faith, we know that we do not deserve God’s grace. Nothing that we can do will put us in a position of deserving God’s grace. All we can do is receive the gift that he offers us.

My nephew and his sister go to a church of a different denomination and when I hear one of them say, “If I get to heaven”, I lose my mind a little bit. I have said to them, “It’s not about if, it’s about when” but it’s difficult for him to understand this concept of grace because he’s been taught that good works earn your way into heaven. But in Romans 11, Paul tells us, “And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.”

Our God is a God of first and last, or last and first, if you consider this parable. He loves us all equally. Regardless of when you come to God, he loves you and his grace covers you. I’m a firm believer that it never hurts to have a refresher in grace, especially when we have a passage that I think so wonderfully exemplifies God’s grace. I’m also a firm believer in not using my own words when someone else puts it much more eloquently than I could, so this comes from umc.org. Wesley taught that God loves everyone, and invites all of us to be in right relationship with him. Because we are unable to do this on our own, God prepares our hearts and minds to accept Jesus’s invitation to follow him before we are even aware of it. As we read in the Bible, “But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). By God’s grace, we recognize our brokenness, long for something more, and learn from Christians who show us God’s love by word and example. Wesley called this prevenient grace, which simply means the grace that “comes before” we know or love God.

The Bible teaches, “You are saved by God’s grace because of your faith” (Ephesians 2:8). This means salvation is not something we deserve or earn, but something that God has done for us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When we recognize our sinfulness and repent, we receive God’s forgiveness and are called to live a new life of following Jesus by loving God and our neighbors. We receive this gift out of what Wesley called God’s justifying grace, because we are “made right” with God. Our relationship is restored.

The moment of justification is the beginning of a wonderful journey with Jesus toward holiness of heart and life. As we participate in God’s work in the world through acts of piety like worship and prayer and acts of mercy like serving others and working for justice for our neighbors, we make ourselves available to God who forms us into the likeness of Jesus.

Wesley sometimes said that God “perfects” us by his grace, but he never intended that to mean we would never make a mistake. Instead, Wesley taught that by God’s grace we would stop sinning intentionally when made perfect in both our love of God and neighbor. We do not wish to harm either of those relationships.

This process, which we might call spiritual growth today, is not something we do. Instead, it is God who lovingly works in us and for us. Wesley called this sanctifying grace—the grace by which God makes us holy in heart and life.

It’s all about the grace, no trouble. God provides that grace without condition, without cause, because of who we are and who we love. It is no trouble for God to provide that grace to everyone.

I think most of us who lived through 9/11, spend time in reflection every year on that day and the days that followed. If the day is beautiful, I sit outside and look at the sky, because I think the beauty of the sky is something we all remember from that day, such a dichotomy from the acts of the terrorists. In the years after 9/11, as I was really first developing a strong understanding of this concept of grace, someone said, “are you telling me that those 9/11 terrorists are going to be in heaven?” At the time, I said, “they won’t be in my heaven”. But as I’ve come to a better understanding, I have a better answer, “You have to want to be in right relationship with God. You have to choose God. You have to have faith that God is your truth and your light. I guess the better question is, “Did the 9/11 terrorists seek to have that right relationship with God?” and we can’t answer that for them.

My sister, Beverly, and I each have a pygmy goat. They are named after our grandfathers, Stanley Fry and Redvers Buhler. They are super cute and about the size of a large Golden Retriever. Well, fine, they are really my brother-in-law’s goats, he does all the caretaking. We just love on them and give them treats. There’s a popular song by Megan Trainor, who is a bass player. The lyrics go like this: “I'm all about that bass, about that bass. I'm all about that bass, no treble”.

Several years ago, during the time when this song was on the radio frequently, Bev had surgery and between the anesthesia and the pain medication, she was pretty loopy. Her husband and I were in the hospital room with her that night and she asked him how the goats were, he told her they were fine, and not causing any trouble. She started to sing: “It’s all about the goats, about the goats, no trouble.” Now, let me tell you, I’ve gotten some mileage out of that story. But I’ve also gotten a personal mantra out of it. “It’s all about that grace, about that grace, no trouble.” I say it to myself a lot, and if that song comes on the radio, I sing my version of the refrain, not Meghan Trainor’s.

For me, the point of this parable is simple. It doesn’t matter if you came to God first, or if you came to him last. It doesn’t matter if you’re last in line to get paid or first in line to get paid; if you’ve known him since you were a child, or since yesterday. We are all recipients of Jesus’ generosity in the form of his grace. His grace surrounds you, it fills your heart, and it makes you whole.

It’s ALL about that grace, no trouble.