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## *Extravagant Grace*

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*Matthew 20:1-16*

One Thursday night last fall, I got home from work and slumped down onto the couch a little more emphatically than usual. It was the kind of dramatic sitting-down event that you hope your spouse notices – a similar move to the long sigh that you hope evokes some sort of response from your companion. My husband Andy took the bait. “What’s up?” I told him I was bummed about something from Confirmation the night before. It was swirling around in my mind all day and I just couldn’t quite release it. I felt that we’d driven home the point of the night’s lesson a little too strongly. Now most of the time this is not an issue – can you really emphasize God’s grace

*too much* or can you really overstate how awesome the movement of the Holy Spirit is, or the sacraments or some other holy mystery? The issue here was the topic of the night. Sin.

I think that many folks in our tradition find it hard to talk about sin, but it's so important to talk about! In my view, we'd do the class a disservice not to talk honestly about the things that separate us from God, the things in the world and our lives that run counter to the narrative of God's grace and love for the world. It is into this reality that God's grace dives headfirst – through Jesus, God extends extravagant grace, pure and uncomplicated, pulling us up from the mire of sin. We heard the scripture from Romans 8 last week, where Paul asks what can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and the answer, of course, is an emphatic *nothing*. That is grace.

As I pondered the class session from the night before, I realized that the conversation might have veered a little too heavily in the direction of sin and brokenness. I wasn't sure we'd leaned into Christian understandings of grace quite enough – that grace is much bigger than sin, that nothing in life or death can separate us from that grace, no matter what, period. This was important learning – Olivia and I reflected on it throughout the year, and rest assured, current 9<sup>th</sup> graders and families, next year's sin conversation will look a little different.

As we move through the year in Confirmation, what I really hope that our confirmands are left with is an abiding sense of God's grace and goodness, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope we're all left with the sense that, in the words of one confirmand,

God has watched over us, given us hope, and guided us through the toughest moments in our existence.

A peer wrote a poetic faith statement that referred to God as our best friend, and another described God as the rock behind what I do in my life. These are all apt descriptions of what I hope we come away with at the end of the year.

And one student summarized the Confirmation process honestly:

I still have a lot of questions, but I would rather have faith than not have any.

I imagine that many of us have the same feeling.

You'll hear a snippet from each confirmand's statement of faith throughout the preaching time today, and I encourage you to read their statements posted outside Westminster Hall during coffee hour. Take a look also at the visual faith statement on the front of your bulletin, a beautiful expression of God's love through art and words.

These are strong reflections about what it means to affirm our place within the Westminster community, and I think you'll catch glimpses of the extravagant grace of God in each statement.

The parable we heard a moment ago is an illustration of that extravagant grace. It's one of the many short stories Jesus told about the kingdom of God – the world of God's realm. One confirmand described the teaching ministry of Jesus, which includes the parables, this way:

I believe that Jesus is like a teacher to us all. He teaches us and shows us how to live, and how to love, and how to be kind and faithful.

This is what the parables do. These stories often leave us scratching our heads, but we press into them because we know they reveal something to us. As one confirmand expressed,

Jesus taught people how to love, forgive, and have compassion for others in his image.

A peer added,

because of Jesus, I find myself wanting to care, not judge, and have empathy for everyone like he did.

And so, we dive into the parables of Jesus, as strange as they sometimes are, trusting that they reveal something of God to us.

Today, we'll dwell a bit in the absurdity of this story – the way it reveals the brokenness of our own world through stark contrast. And, ultimately, how it reveals the wild extravagance of God's grace.

As with most of the parables, this story starts out with very ordinary details – ordinary to the context of first-

century Palestine, that is. There is a vineyard – this is ordinary, familiar in Jesus’s context. And there is an owner of the vineyard – again, quite ordinary. The vineyard owner is, of course, concerned with finding workers to maintain said vineyard, and he knows he’ll find people looking for work near the local market – again, this is all expected, nothing interesting to see here. He hires some workers first thing in the morning, and they get to work.

This is where it all gets weird. The landowner goes back to the market around 9am and sees somebody else hanging around looking for work, so he hires him. Ok, benefit of the doubt, maybe the landowner just didn’t start the day with the level of support he needed to get the day’s work done. But it keeps getting weirder – he goes back again to the market at noon and hires someone else. And then again at 3pm and again at 5pm, the end of the day! And the strangest detail of all, the crux of the parable: the

landowner lines everybody up, last hired to first hired, and pays everyone the same.

Imagine how this move felt to each of the people in the story. The guys that got hired first are watching as the 5pm guys get paid *super* well. They're thinking, "wow, this guy is pretty generous." But then he keeps going down the line and lo and behold, *everyone* is getting that pay. By the end of it, the early morning guys are not happy. The landowner responds, "Are y'all envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

It is clear by the end of the story that the landowner is not interested in profit margins or efficient business systems. This is not a "how to run a business" parable. This is a kingdom of God parable, a "world turned upside down" parable. It's a parable that challenges our sense of justice and makes us abandon our notions of "fairness"



altogether. It makes clear that, as one confirmand remarked,

God does not have favorites.

If this story is what the kingdom of God is like, then the kingdom of God is nothing like the world we live in. it is something else entirely. Scholar Kimberly Wagner wrote, “this parable offers assurance that God is not bound by our limited insight or capacities. God doesn’t work with a slightly better version of our logic. Instead, God’s Kingdom is marked by grace beyond our imagining and generosity beyond our deserving.”

Indeed. The grace of God is extravagant. It makes no sense. It is pure gift.

This parable throws into sharp relief the difference between the world we live in and the world of God’s

realm. I say this not to discourage us but to encourage us to be real with ourselves and one another. We long for a world like the world of the parables, but it is not always what we get. Our confirmands get this – many of them named in their faith statements the ways that we are called to respond to God’s grace with our own generous living.

One confirmand wrote,

I believe that we as Christians are wrong for upholding any forms of injustice or harm, as it does not help to generate justice and peace on earth – which is what I believe to be God’s wish.

Another peer reflected on Westminster’s “Our Hope for the World” statement, which you can find on the church website,

I believe God entrusted us with the core responsibilities of caring for our planet and each other. In a world damaged by things like inequality and global warming, we have a shared obligation to do our best to make the Earth a better place to live.

This is big – the call to respond to the myriad ways that sin shows up in our world. In fact, without the grace of God, it becomes *too* big. We tire out quickly and our hope loses steam. But thanks be to God, grace abounds, and grace is so much bigger than sin, so much bigger than the realities across our wide world that threaten to drive us to despair.

Several confirmands reflected on the glimpses of God's extravagant grace that help to bolster their faith. One wrote,

I see God in the big things and the small things in life, from a garden of flowers to natural disasters. I believe that God is present in these moments and helps us get through tough situations.

Another noted,

I can see the influence of the Spirit all around me. It can be found in people's actions and words, as well as the bountiful Earth beneath our feet.

and yet another wrote,

I see God in all the peaceful moments I enjoy with nature, the content moments with family and friends; I see God in music, in all sorts of human connection. For me, God is everywhere.

One student even reflected on the ways that God's grace transforms even the reality of death:

I'm still dismayed by the thought of death, but knowing God is by my side comforts me. Just like God is everlasting, so will be my soul.

Indeed – the reality of sin and death in the world are immense. There is suffering that is difficult even to name, and it surrounds us, threatening to undo us. But in the midst of it all is a kind and generous God who, through Jesus, opens the way to us for abundant life. Life with hope and without fear. For this gift, we can only respond with gratitude. We will proclaim this gratitude alongside our newly confirmed tenth graders in our closing hymn today – the first verse ends so beautifully.

“Gifted by you, we turn to you, offering up ourselves in praise; thankful song shall rise forever, gracious donor of our days.”

May it be so. Amen.