

Into A World of Ungrace, Grace Comes

17th Sunday after Pentecost – Oct. 5, 2014

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Today, the Good News comes to us within the parable of the Vineyard, which Jesus told to his antagonists. The Pharisees who were out to destroy him, and in so doing thought they could keep the Kingdom of God in their own control. This parable is hard to fully understand, so let me start with another story written in parable form – The story of the Self-righteous Hermit:

Once upon a time, a hermit, who prided himself for his exemplary faith and reputation for being a righteous man, set out one morning for a neighboring church. As he walked the path carrying his wood staff, thoughts of self-complacency and pride occupied his mind. Suddenly he noticed a poor man who appeared to be weeping bitterly by the side of the road. On approaching him, the Hermit realized that this man was a notorious robber, known to terrorize the surrounding neighborhood. He was about to retreat when the man advanced to meet him and threw himself at his feet, confessing his crimes, and begging for pardon.

The Hermit, astonished and shocked at hearing the recital of so many enormous sins, couldn't help but compare them to his own innocent and blameless life. Swelling with pride and indignation, he exclaimed to the man, *"How dare you ask for pardon, you wicked sinner! Sooner shall roses bloom upon this dry wooden staff than a just God grant forgiveness for sins as great as yours!"*

He turned away from the weeping sinner, leaving him on the brink of despair. The Hermit hadn't proceeded very far when the staff which he carried in his hand became rooted in the ground. He tried to pull it out, but it wouldn't budge. And then a miracle began to happen. The dry wood staff began to bud; leaf and flowers sprouting forth until the stick was laden with blooming roses; and as he watched in amazement, his mind heard a voice whispering: *"Sooner shall roses bloom on this barren staff than a good God will REFUSE mercy to the repenting sinner or grant it to the proud one."*

At that, the Hermit came to himself, repented of his own sin, and ran back to make peace with the poor sinner by the side of the road. (Stories and Parables for Preachers and Teachers, by Paul J. Wharton, p. 38)

Our challenge in the proclamation of the Gospel this morning, dear friends in Christ, is to apply it to our OWN failures at faithfully following Jesus rather than applying it to the faults of others. It is to name and confront places of UNGRACE in our own world, so that the GRACE of Christ can flow through us to a hurting world. As people WOVEN TOGETHER IN LOVE, a vine grafted into the Spirit of our living Lord, we need to hold one another to a higher standard of what that love looks and acts like in the vineyard Jesus names as His church. We are the body of Christ made manifest into the world for the proclamation of truth, which sets all free. We are called to discipleship with eyes wide open!

Ultimately the truth that sets us free is simply this, that in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ, poured out for all upon a cross of rejection; praying, *"Father, forgive them!"*

They know not what they do!" the cornerstone of AMAZING GRACE for an ungracious world was laid. The vineyard of abundant life is restored in the tending mercy of God who no longer tears down, throws away and starts over, as the imagery of Isaiah's song implies, but which reclaims ownership calling forgiven people to discipleship beyond themselves and their sense of entitlement.

What is entitlement? Years ago, as a young mother, I was in a grocery store with my three toddlers. My son Erik, who was about six at the time and claiming his identity as "king" over his two younger sisters, decided that his harried, distracted mother ought to buy him some candy that was so easily accessible at the check out counter. I said No, it was nearly lunchtime, and there would be no candy today. So, he grabbed some candy and threw it on the conveyor belt assuming that I wouldn't notice it until I had paid the bill. But, of course, I did see it and told him, NO, put that candy back! Now angry, Erik then caused a ruckus by throwing a tantrum. I guess he assumed I would give in just to keep him quiet. Instead, I handed the candy back to the cashier and ignored his tantrum. So upping the ante, my darling son took a can off the belt and prepared to throw it at the cashier! What's a mother to do! Luckily, I grabbed his arm in time to stop his murderous rage from unfolding, dragged him out of the store without murdering him myself! And then, I spent some quality time reshaping his understanding of what had just happened. "I am the parent, so until you grow up, I am in charge! You are my beloved child and I want you to have everything you need, but you do NOT have the right to take anything you want just because you want it, and you certainly don't have the right to hurt others! "

Every parent has been there. But can we grown-ups also see the way that entitlement creeps into our adult lives; our workplace; our families; and especially our church? Are there not times when we think that receiving the good news of Jesus Christ puts us in some superior, safe place in regard to Jesus? Don't we sometimes feel entitled to speculate about who is "in" and who is "out" of God's Kingdom, rather than examining our own lives, actions and behaviors that "reject" the Jesus of AMAZING GRACE FOR ALL on a regular basis?

Giving over the fruit of our labor to God who is the rightful owner of this church is not always easy. Sometimes, truth be told, we ARE like the Pharisees who assume that we have control over this particular vineyard called Christ the King Lutheran Church. The fruit here is abundant, and that's terrific, but we need to keep our ownership of that fruit from assuming it should be distributed as we see fit, rather than given over to the power of the Holy Spirit. And we can't pull it back when God's love may offer that fruit to the world in ways that are different than we might expect. As children of God, we can get caught up in petty fights, harsh criticisms, resistance to change and especially the fear that the future may evolve to a place that isn't within the traditions we have always cherished. BUT, as children of God, we ARE forgiven. We are made new each and every day. And we are given the blessings of grace so that Grace CAN be poured out upon an ungracious world.

And so, as children of God, we must cry out to our Lord as we did in our opening dialogue this morning saying: **Look down from heaven, O God; behold and tend this vine.** For the Christ who has planted us in the vineyard of His church, and called us into discipleship as shepherd's of His sheep, has also given us a walking staff to lean on: his Word and His Spirit. A walking staff that sometimes stops us in our tracks, grabs hold of the soil of our hearts, and bursts forth with buds, leaves and roses, whispering into our repentant hearts: *"Sooner shall roses bloom on this barren staff than our good and gracious God REFUSE mercy to the repenting sinner or grant it to the proud one."*

This, my friends, is the Good news of the Parable of the Vineyard today, that God DOES tend to the vine that is His church, and will NOT leave us to our sins of entitlement, pride or fear. But bursts forth with GRACE that cannot be contained, stopped or hoarded. It is for ALL who seek mercy and life abundant in Christ.

The Apostle Paul understood this well as the first "pastor" of Christ's emerging church, awakening within an ungracious world to the news of Grace and eternal life found in our Risen Christ. God used Paul to plant the vineyard of the body of Christ everywhere. And as Paul was traveling, preaching, and writing, he called upon the children of God to live a new kind of life where, together with the Holy Spirit, we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that God is at work to will and to work for the Kingdom that will not end. "Hold fast" to the word of life, Paul said, rejoice and be glad...count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. And, as every spiritual leader or follower of Christ must admit with humble, yet confident faith, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus made me his own." (Phil. 3: 12) Amen.