

SERMON: “like me: saved by grace.”

Rev. Geoff Ross: Friday, March 30, 2018, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church

God’s grace is not something we can earn or deserve. Grace – God’s life altering/saving amazing grace – is something that God offers to us freely/unilaterally. And, as a result, grace can be scandalous/offensive: we have trouble accepting the apparent injustice of God’s magnanimous/extravagant, seemingly indiscriminate dispensation of grace – sure, we’re happy/grateful when we receive it; but we get angry/indignant when it’s given to someone we think is unworthy of any kind of forgiveness. This is why Jesus spent His life/ministry/death teaching about grace – and what Phillip Yancey calls the “*scandalous mathematics of grace.*”

[Parable: “Labourers in the Vineyard” (Mat 20:1-15) – Dawn/9/noon/3/5 for same/agreed wage. Angry. Last = to first. Landowner: “*Friend, I am doing you no wrong; Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*”] Grace X fair! Offensive scandalous!]

To be fair, fairness is a tricky thing. After all, what’s fair to one might not be fair to another: the anger felt by the workers was justified, but so is the landowner’s right to be generous. Still, it seems unfair – at least to us/our world. Thankfully, Jesus taught that the Kingdom of Heaven doesn’t operate according to what we think is fair – or how we measure fairness! And this is Good News because if it did, none of us would get in! Think about it: if God “played fair” – by our sense of what is “fair” – then we would each get what we deserve; and is that what we really want? Is it?

What does this have to do with Good Friday? Everything. Because Kingdom fairness – grace – is what Good Friday is all about. Jesus came to offer God’s grace to the lost of this world – to those who had fallen/drifted/gone astray: those whose only hope of redemption was a ‘get out of jail free’ card – and that’s what He did to His dying breath. His life was lived as an expression of God’s grace; He was an example/the fulfillment of/full measure of God’s love for us, and His power to redeem/restore/save us. Throughout His life Jesus offered grace to sinners, and now, on the cross, in one of His last earthly acts, He offered grace to one more wretch like you/like me – a nameless criminal, condemned to death beside Him.

In the midst of the taunts – insults added to His injuries – hurled by the curious, the religious authorities, and soldiers (“*He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!*” “*King of the Jews, save yourself!*”), and even one of those hanging on a cross next to Him (“*Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*”); Jesus hears someone speak out in His defence. The second criminal “rebukes” the first saying; “*Do you not fear God, since you’re about to die too? We’ve been condemned justly, ... we’re getting what we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong.*” Regardless of what he did to deserve his punishment, [Cross/extreme/reserved for worst/unrepentant criminals] he believed in God; and, recognizing his own guilt, he has no illusions about deserving any other fate: if there is an afterlife – he knew he wasn’t getting in. His only hope was to receive what he probably rarely gave: mercy and

grace. So, in faith/hope – in an act of desperation – he cries out the cry of the lost; *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* (Luke 23:36-42)
[God with us/of us/for us:born to die. God’s Plan/purpose – Cradle&Cross]

To our cynical ears this “Hail Mary repentance” seems like the desperate, empty ploy employed by less than contrite people caught with their hands in the cookie jar, making promises/bargains to avoid the time for their crime. But, with nothing to offer, the man ends up getting what God thought he deserved. In one last act of grace Jesus responds. Despite the pain/suffering – that He was dying – Jesus answers his prayer by assuring him that *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* (Luke 23:43) And with that promise, one last sinner was saved by grace. Scandalous/offensive: amazing! Why? Because *“God sent his only Son into the world ...to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins”* so that someone like him/you/me could/can be saved by grace. (1 John 4:9-10)

Friends, God knows us/what we’ve done: and yet God still loves us enough to forgive us. Jesus came to do what nobody else could – to offer Himself in order to fulfil God’s promise of salvation/as the ransom/payment/the full/final sacrifice for our sins – to remove our sins. The reason Good Friday is ‘good’ is because it is a day of grace: it is the day that God made us “good” again/that God, through Jesus’ death, signalled to a world in need of grace that the Kingdom of Heaven had room enough/prepared for wretches like you/like me – lost and then found people – who have been saved by grace. Amen.