

What is a Church? Part 1: *A Community of Grace*
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Hingham, Massachusetts
September 14, 2014

Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

What is grace?

For those who see God as judgmental and vengeful, grace is difficult to grasp. Even for those of us who just think people should get what they deserve, grace makes very little sense. Phillip Yancey, who has written much on the topic of grace, tells this story:

I remember once getting stuck in Los Angeles traffic and arriving 58 minutes late at the Hertz rental desk. I walked up in kind of a bad mood, put the keys down and said, "How much do I owe?" The woman says, "Nothing. You're all clear." I said I was late and she smiled, "Yes, but there's a one-hour grace period." So I asked, "Oh really, what is grace?" And she said, "I don't know. [They must not cover that in Hertz training classes.] I guess what it means is that even though you're supposed to pay, you don't have to." That's a good start to a definition of grace.¹

Over the next few weeks, we'll be talking about what it means to be a church. This morning, in Part 1 of the series, I'd like for us to think about *grace* as *the* key ingredient in our life together.

In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul is, as usual, trying to make peace. The Roman Christians aren't getting along, criticizing each other up and down about theology, food choices, the Sabbath, and more... insisting on their own way and generally losing sight of what it means to stick together and love one another. So in this letter, he tries to get them to stop being so judgmental.

Apparently, conflict was a part of the Christian experience from the very beginning, because Matthew tells of a time during Jesus' earthly

ministry when Peter asks him how many times he has to forgive another member of the church. We know that this conversation was either created by the author of Matthew or was edited or evolved over time because Peter uses the word *church* when there is no such thing as a church at this point in the story.

My assumption is that the author of Matthew and his church were being confronted with this question of forgiveness, especially when the one who hurts you is supposed to be your brother or sister in Christ.

In one of the churches I served early in my career, our Treasurer stole \$84,000 from the church. Senior church leaders met and decided *not* to press charges, only to ask for restitution. The District Attorney pressed charges anyway and our Treasurer went to jail.

So, we put him on the prayer list (which made some people who struggled with the concept of grace *very* angry) and a few of us tried to visit him in jail, but he wouldn't see us. I understand why the DA pressed charges; our Treasurer got what he deserved, right? But I have always wondered what would have happened if we had been allowed to give him what he *didn't* deserve, which is what God gives all of us: *unmerited grace*.

A couple of you have church stories that are even more dramatic than that, but the injuries we visit upon one another in places like this are usually much more mundane: emotional blackmail, insensitivity, hurtful gossip, eating the last piece of coffee cake at coffee hour, sitting in someone else's pew (That's the worst!).

So Peter asks, *Jesus, How many times do I have to forgive a church member who sins against me? As many as seven times?*

Now, since there was at that time a Jewish tradition of forgiving people up to *three* times, Peter thinks he's being super extra gracious in suggesting *seven* times.

But Jesus takes it even further and says, *Seventy-seven times*. Some translations read, *Seventy times seven*, which is of course 490.

Whichever one it is, as is usual in Matthew, Jesus ups the ante, calling his disciples to a higher standard of love.

And he doesn't mean we should forgive precisely seventy-seven times (or 490 times). Just as God's grace is limitless, we are being asked to stop counting altogether. Grace is not linear or numerical. Grace doesn't keep score.

Some scholars think that Jesus is riffing on a story from Genesis in which the numbers *seven* and *seventy seven* are used to describe God's unlimited *vengeance* against those who would harm members of the original family from Eden. Here in Matthew, Jesus radically reverses direction, using the same numbers to refer to unlimited *forgiveness* instead of vengeance.

And then Jesus shares this crazy parable about someone who owes his king 10,000 talents -- the modern equivalent of five billion dollars. *Five billion dollars!* In case we weren't listening, Jesus now has our full attention.

The king can sell the guy and his wife and kids into slavery, so the guy begs for time and promises to pay (as if he can pay back 5 billion dollars). But the king, inexplicably, completely lets him off the hook and *forgives the entire debt*.

This is inconceivable... which is kind of the point. Forgiveness is not a logical act; it is a sacred and indefinably beautiful gift.

But then, the same guy who was forgiven turns around and refuses to forgive someone who owes him 100 denarii, the modern equivalent of \$4,000., a debt more than *one million times smaller* than the one he had owed. And he won't forgive it! And not only that, he has his debtor thrown into jail! As outrageous as his king's grace was to him, this is just as outrageous in a very hateful way.

In communities like this, like Hingham Congregational Church, the values of Jesus provide a basis for our life together. When God or someone else lets us off the hook for something we've done or left undone, it's not just something to be enjoyed for ourselves, but turned

outward and shared whenever possible. When we pass the peace during worship, we are celebrating God's grace towards each one of us and practicing what it means to be gracious to each other.

And what if we *don't* treat each other graciously? Matthew includes two stark warnings at the end of the passage.

The king in the story, upon finding out how terribly unforgiving his servant really is, hands him over to be tortured until he can pay his entire 5 billion dollar debt (which means he'll be tortured forever, since paying back 5 billion dollars is impossible).

And then Matthew reports that Jesus says, *So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*

Really? I'm not sure I recognize this torturing God. What is Matthew up to?

First of all, parables are tricky. And from the beginning, people have struggled to understand them. So, sometimes stuff was added by early biblical authors and editors to try to explain what Jesus meant. And they didn't always get it right. Imagine threatening the church with *torture* at the end of a parable about *grace*!

The other thing about parables is that they can't be read literally. It's important to back up and look at the energy and movement in the story. Grace is offered and accepted, but then not shared, and there are consequences.

In the same way, Jesus invites each of us into a community of grace – this community. And yet we cannot truly experience that grace unless we approach with grace the people around us, especially those who hurt or oppose us. As Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospels, *It's easy to love your friends; it's loving your enemies that takes true faith.*

And since the church is kind our rehearsal space for our real lives, the hope is that we can practice grace here and then hopefully get it right out there.

One qualification I would offer is that I know that some of you have been abused as children, as young adults, or as adults.

We've all heard the adage, *We must forgive in order to let go of our anger*. That is true to an extent, but for some of you, forgiveness of certain people is inconceivable. And that's OK. Nothing I say from this pulpit is ever meant to make you feel guilty or to hurry you along toward something that feels impossible right now.

What I *do* think this parable does for each and every one of us (even those of us who have been terribly hurt) is to give us an ideal way to live with one another in the church and in life.

God's grace – God's outrageous, freely given, loving, liberating mercy - - is the foundation of our shared life. Which means, when differences bubble to the surface, when conflict arises, when feelings are hurt, when disagreement threatens to undo us or drive us apart, *we need not fear*. We need only rest on the grace of the One who loves us completely, and embrace and engage with one another, once again, in that very same spirit.

Amen.

¹<http://philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/grace>