

FROM ANACORTES UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

How Big is God's Grace?

Matthew 15:21-28

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Today's lesson from Matthew's Gospel is one of my favorites. It is the story of a woman whose daughter has been taken over by an evil spirit. Who knows what Matthew meant by "an evil spirit". Perhaps it was a mental illness. Maybe it was the flu. Whatever it was, this evil spirit threatens the life of this mother's daughter. And like any true mother, she is desperate for her daughter's healing. She will even approach a foreign prophet, a man from the wrong God.

Matthew 15:21-28

Please pray with me. God of power and wisdom, of compassion and patience, make the meditations of my heart and the words of my mouth useful to your love and helpful to us and your world. Amen.

Two questions occurred to me as I prayed about this passage: 1) How big is God's grace? 2) How big is my trust of God's grace?

They are small questions and we ought to be done in time for supper on Thursday.

First, how big is God's grace? Are there limits to how much and how often God will love, forgive, and heal? Can we think of something so awful that "surely here and surely now" God will not give grace? Is it possible to be so "wrong" in some way that we are forever condemned?

Let's try, beginning at birth. Is God's grace for those who are born broken? This is a big deal in first century Israel. To have a birth defect is to carry a curse from God. But for Jesus, there is no curse from birth for he heals those born blind, lame, and deaf. There is nothing about how we are born that sets God against us.

Maybe how we choose to spend our lives can make God turn from us. Is God's grace for the criminal? Evidently so, because Jesus eats with and accepts embezzlers, prostitutes, drunkards and thieves

Surely we must be able to do something that will cause God to withhold grace? Perhaps murder? But then we remember the two murderers, who were hung with Jesus. One of them called for and was granted mercy. And we remember how Jesus, as he was being crucified, requested forgiveness for the ones murdering him. God's grace is big enough for murderers.

What about the ill? Does God have grace for us in our illness? Jesus heals several lepers. He heals the feverish, the woman with a continuous blood flow, the bent woman. God's love is for our health and what health we have comes from God.

Some folks say that men have a special place before God. Perhaps God has more grace for men than for women or children. Jesus is very clear about the centrality of children and the importance of women.

But then what about the nonbeliever? Surely, if we don't believe in God then God won't work grace in our lives. The Canaanite mother of today's lesson is a pagan. She probably worships El and a whole pantheon of lesser gods, and yet she still gets grace. And remember the hated Roman Centurion who probably worshipped Caesar and how Jesus healed his child?

I know of only one limit to grace. Each of the three earliest

gospels mentions the same thing.¹ And interestingly, it is not a God made limit, but a limit we make. Matthew says it this way:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, that is, whoever speaks against God being for all and in all the world; whoever speaks against God loving us, God forgiving, teaching and healing us, has stepped across the line. Ironic, and very sad isn't it, that it is not God who limits mercy, but we who place boundaries upon divine grace. Our attitudes, our words, our actions, our prayers are what hinder forgiveness, hinder healing, and make small God's love among us. Our faith, not God's grace, is the limit.

This raises my second question, "How big is my faith? How big is my vision of God's grace for life?" Do I limit God's mercy by my view of God? Do I have a small view of God with us, so that God is only for America, or only for United Methodists, or only for Christians, only for Sundays or emergencies? Or is my God big, so that every breath is a breathing of Holy Spirit, every person an encounter with Jesus, and every event, for good or evil, an unfolding of holiness?

The Canaanite mother had a big vision of God's grace. She sees a grace which is bigger than ancient racisms, or religious rivalries. When Jesus, the son of David, i.e., a Jew, would not even acknowledge her cries for mercy ("he did not answer her a word"), then she pestered the disciples until they interceded for her out of annoyance. And when Jesus rejects her because she is "not of the tribe of Israel," not of the right nation, not of the right religion, nor of the right family, still she will not shrink her view of God's grace.

If she cannot have grace through compassion, or grace through persistence, then, if she must be a dog in the house of the Lord, she will have grace as the crumbs that fall from the table. She believes that God is so big in grace that random crumbs will be enough. She believes that even stray mercy, dropped mercy, unintentional mercy, will heal her daughter. It is an amazing story of a truly remarkable faith. Her faith is so great that even Jesus' faith is enlarged so that he heals her daughter.

And so the Canaanite woman and now Jesus both think of God's grace as enormous, bigger than any one tribe, religion or gender. What do I believe? How big is my understanding of God's grace? How big is yours?

And if God's grace is so enormous as to include all the world, why do some daughters die and others miraculously recover? Why don't all the little girls of the world, those in the midst of war, in the midst of famine, those in the midst of AIDS, all the sick little girls of the world, get well right now? If God is so big where is grace in the mental wards and on the streets of violence?

I'll be honest; I don't understand how this grace thing really works, especially around healing. I know some people I pray for die and others who I don't pray for live. I know some very good people die early and some pretty rotten people live long. I don't know how to make miracles

¹ Mt. 12:31-32, Mk. 3:28-29, Luke 12:10

happen when I most want them. When I was sitting with Vickie's grandpa as he was dying of cancer, a man I had come to love as my own grandfather, I prayed hard, deep, with confidence and grandpa died anyway.

But this I do understand, I cannot control God's grace to do my will. I know that in this age of science, to understand something is to be able to control it by predicting it and directing it. To understand chemistry is to predict and control the interaction of atoms and molecules. To understand biology is to predict and control the interaction of organic systems. In fact, science is only regarded as successful when it can predict, repeat and control the outcome of some event. In this way we take charge of the world around us, creating good crops, big machines and systems to serve our desires. Life in science is a gaining of power over the world.

Evidently God's grace is not science, is not inclined to my gaining power. Jesus says in the Gospel of John:

The wind (pneuma/spirit) blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.²

God's great big grace is not about my desires, but about God's desire. Life in grace is not about me taking control of the world, even for the best reasons. To accept God's grace in life is to surrender, to lose control of purpose, direction and result. But because we do not understand "whence it comes" and because we cannot manipulate "whence it goes," does not mean grace is not present. Grace falls from heaven like crumbs from the table.

Our dog Beau, when we are preparing food at the kitchen counter, stands next to us and stares at the floor. Beau doesn't understand "from whence" the food comes. He just knows that every so often, if he is standing in the right place, at the right time, carefully watching the floor, manna appears. And so he patiently stares at the floor, waiting for grace. And when the crumbs come, he gratefully wags his tail, licks it up and returns to staring at the floor.

Maybe there are those who understand and can direct the comings and the goings of grace. But I am not one of those. I am like Beau. I try to be in the right place, staring at where grace might appear, waiting for the Lord. And I have yet to be disappointed. God's grace does drop from heaven.

When my friend Jim Palmer was slowly dying, he did not lose heart. He waited for God. He never gave up on God's power to heal his body. But it was not his body that received grace. His heart and soul were overwhelmed by God's love. He died full of grace and peace. A peace I envy for its profound depth. And it is a peace I do not understand and I cannot command. Those of you who work with the dying, and those of you who have lived with them, know what I am talking about. Even when the healing we want doesn't come, the healing of God is never-the-less present and working in our lives.

Gayle Sandholm has done a great many favors for my life. His kindness and patience with me both as co-pastor and then District

² John 3:8

Superintendent is legendary. He once attended a boring conference and in desperation wandered into an Evangelical Christian gathering. There he found a T-shirt produced by HarperCollins-Publishers that he brought to some of us. After a long useful life it is now my nightshirt. Every night I literally wrap myself in this scripture to sleep.

This is it (hold it up). On the front of the T-Shirt is a quote from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. Paul is speaking of the fact that though there is faith, there is still also suffering:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.³

God's grace is big; very, very big. It renews us and the whole of the world day by day in its own mysterious way. It only appears small when we make it small. But if we were to make our faith as big as the Caananite woman's and as big as Jesus' faith, then maybe not all the little girls of the world could be saved, but certainly most of the little girls and their brothers, mothers and fathers, the very creation itself would be healed of the evil that possesses us. May our faith be as big as God's love is for us. May we be faithful disciples of Jesus.

Shalom and Amen.

³ II Corinthians 4:16