

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner  
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany (C)  
Sunday, January 20, 2019

*Isaiah 62:1-5 | Psalm 36:5-10*  
*1 Corinthians 12:1-11 | John 2:1-11*

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest (Isaiah 62:1a)*

Have you heard the saying:

Mercy is when you don't get what you do deserve.  
Grace is when you do get what you don't deserve.

That is, mercy can be described as holding something back, something you should get because you deserve it but, for some reason, you are spared.

This of course is where the phrases, "beg for mercy" or "I'm at the mercy of the court" come from.

Like when you cheat on your beloved but they don't leave you.

That's mercy.

Or you steal from your work but you don't get fired.

That's mercy.

So if Mercy is when you don't get what you do deserve –  
and Grace is when you get what you don't deserve...what is grace?

As a noun, there are six entirely different definitions of grace –

from a title like "Good Morning, your Grace"  
to "the grace period" between when your mortgage is due and when they start charging a late fee.

The term grace as we are using it today appears more than 100 times in the New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible and can be found in the beginning with Genesis and all the way at the end in Revelation.

So, while it might seem hard to define it is important to at least try to understand it.

The theological definition is, "a kindness that is undeserved."

In order to capture what some theologians say is a more “three-dimensional” sense of grace, we can look at today’s passage from John.<sup>1</sup>

“John moves us beyond the ‘free gift’ and ‘generosity’ sense of grace to remind us that grace also means abundance. As in an unbelievable, more than you can possibly imagine kind of abundance.”<sup>2</sup>

Let’s look more closely at the wedding story:

John makes the claim that this fully human Jesus from Nazareth is the Messianic King and teacher of Israel, and he is the Son of God who will die for the sins of the whole world.<sup>3</sup>

To support this, John places Jesus in classic Jewish institutions and has him show how he is the reality to which the institution points.

The first example of this is the wedding in Cana.

Now, weddings are a big deal.

They were then and they are now.

This wedding that John tells us about is a family affair:

It seem like everyone is there,  
Jesus,  
his brothers and, presumably, his sisters,  
the disciples and, of course,  
his mother.

Mary may have even been a hostess of sorts since she is talking with the servers and worried about the guests.

Have you ever been to a big wedding where something’s gone wrong?

Like when the preacher calls the bride by the wrong name...during the entire ceremony.

Or when the preacher says “you may kiss the bride” and the ring bearer plants one on the flower girl.

Well in this wedding the father of the bride runs out of wine.

Now, running out is more than just embarrassing – it is a disaster.

Remember wine is not just a social thing that helps the wedding guests get ready to do the Electric Slide.

It is a sign of the harvest – of God’s abundance and favor.

Wine represents joy and gladness and hospitality.

So not having enough wine means not having enough of God’s blessing.

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, again, I get John even when the year is supposed to allow me to preach on Luke!

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/01/epiphany-2-c-what-grace-looks-like/>

<sup>3</sup> The Bible Project, Read Scripture: Illustrated Summaries of Biblical Books; The Gospel According to John, p. 94.

You can see how that would be a real problem.

Which is why it is important to notice that Jesus provides not just cheap box white zin, but the best wine – the kind one would only serve at very special occasions to very special people.

And he gives not just enough wine to finish off dinner, but more wine than the crowd could drink during the entire three day wedding feast.

Just as it says in Isaiah, the Messiah's Kingdom would be like a huge party with good wine (Isaiah 25:6-8) and this miracle reveals the generosity of Jesus's Kingdom.

John is telling early Christians then, and all of us today, that Jesus brings more joy, more blessing, more love, more of God, than we can ever ask or imagine.

Certainly more than we deserve.

And John tells this story, this sign as he calls it, first because it sets the tone and agenda for the rest of his gospel.

This is a sign that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed.

But not to bring military might and kingly oversight...instead one who brought unearned, undeserved kindness.

Kindness that can only be experienced in the context of a relationship.

The kind of relationship where there is an imbalance and you are on the negative side of the ledger.

John is telling us in this miracle story that Jesus, God living among us, brings unearned, undeserved kindness.

In a word, Grace.

I know this is a miracle but don't you want it to be true?

I wonder, why doesn't EVERYONE want this story to be true.

I get that some, if not most of us, don't understand HOW it can be true.

But why wouldn't we want it to be true even if our mind can't explain it?

Because before Jesus, it was an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Now, don't get me wrong...Jesus wasn't a push-over.

He brought both Grace AND Truth.

Jesus called sin a sin and sinners, well, he called us sinners.

If you read the gospels, Jesus was all grace and all truth – all the time.

And thank goodness.

If it were all about justice, God's justice would crush us.

Let's be honest, as sinners we don't want what is due to us.

We know sin comes with its own set of consequences.

But Jesus showed us that even with the consequences, we get something far more valuable, far more important – forgiveness.

That is by God's grace.

And it is given in abundance.

It isn't that God forgets what we've done...it's a reminder that God knows ALL that we've done and loves us anyway.

Unearned.

Undeserved.

So what do we do with this grace we've been given by God?

That, I think is the hardest lesson of all today.

Harder even than being asked to believe in miracles.

The lesson of Jesus's life and death, is that we are to extend that grace to others.

Because that is our greatest opportunity to be more like Jesus.

Trust me, I know it isn't easy.

Because, remember, grace is the gift you give to someone who doesn't deserve it!

And usually if you think they don't deserve it, it is because they've hurt you or someone you love.

But that is what Jesus asks us to do.

And, here's the hardest part...if you are a Christian, you have no choice.

Listen, I get it.

I know the church is a gathering of imperfect people with different views and experiences.

We don't agree on everything.

In the Episcopal Church we hardly agree on anything!

But imagine the world if we could agree on this:

we are responsible for extending to others the grace God freely gives to us.

Even the person who hurt you.

Even the person with whom you disagree.

Even the person who looks or thinks or acts nothing like you.

And most especially the person who least deserves it.

Because Jesus has a term for those of us who don't share God's grace – hypocrites.

The people Jesus had the most problem with were RELIGIOUS people who didn't believe they needed grace and were absolutely unable to give grace to others.

Jesus had no patience for them.

And Jesus isn't the only one.

Christians are called hypocrites quite often.

And sadly for good reason.

Because Christians are supposed to be different.

We talk about God but then act like we don't know God.

But we do know God.

And God knows us.

All of us.

God knows your story – even your secrets

Like the ones about your childhood;  
Or the weekend away where what happens there stays there;  
And all the loopholes and gray areas;  
all of it...  
and still God gives you grace.

What you've done and what you've left undone.

God loves you through that, in spite of that.

And God asks that you do the same.

I said at the beginning of Advent, we are to prepare our hearts and lives for God's love to come and be with us.

I said just before Christmas, I wasn't ready...but that was ok.

I said between Christmas and Epiphany that I felt like this was going to get complicated but God would be with us through the twists and turns.

And now, I feel, it all comes together in a way.

That the miracle of grace that John's gospel shares with us today is the key.

Grace is the key to welcoming Jesus into our lives.

Grace is the key to understanding God's love in new and unexpected ways.

Grace is the key to living as someone who is known by God and knows God.

Grace, the unmatched, unlimited, uncontainable Grace of God is the key.

And we need to not only accept that miracle God gives us but give it away as well.

*For Zion's sake let's not keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake let's not rest (Isaiah 62:1a)*