

Shiloh United Methodist Church

True Grace: The Salvation of God

Matthew 20:1-16

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November 18, 2018

Matthew 7:13-14

Exodus 32

(Play intro video -

<https://www.facebook.com/shilohbillings.church/videos/345783112659468/>)

Today I want to share with you one of my first uncomfortable religious experiences. Many of us have had them, but we often forget how much they shape our faith. They teach us quickly where we see the gaps in how people allow God's grace to enter the world.

My experience happened in a church basement in one of those typical Sunday school rooms. It was a Wednesday night, I sat in the room with other kids and an adult leader, we were learning scripture verses. Our adult leader read this scripture,

Matthew 7:13-14 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹³ "Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. ¹⁴ But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.

After reading this scripture she pointed to a poster on the wall, on it was a poster. One side of the poster had a wide gate and beyond its threshold was fire and what appeared to be lava. On the other half was a narrow gate and through its entry you could see a lush valley with waterfalls, rainbows, and I believe now if I had looked hard enough I would have seen a unicorn.

The teacher then said, “If you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior then you will start on the narrow path tonight, but all those who don’t accept Jesus will head down the wide path.” Our leader’s finger pointed to the fiery chasm on one half of the poster.

One of my friend’s hands shot up, “What about my grandma who died not going to church?” The leader looked uncomfortable and said, “Well, I don’t know, but I would guess they went down the wide road.”

I was horrified to imagine that my God would relegate my friend’s grandma to this fate, just because she didn’t get to church each Sunday.

As a pastor, I deeply believe the Bible has writings that will direct us to God. As a Christian, Jesus’ teachings are the roadmap for my life, and I highly value this scripture we just heard from the book of Matthew in how I live out my faith. As a person of faith, I believe God has the ability to come into our lives daily and help our imperfect, infallible, human actions to help build the kingdom of God. As a person who is committed to religion and its purpose to help people to connect with God, I want to do what happens far too often and apologize for when faith has been wielded like a weapon to exclude people from the love of God, instead of the radical salvific spirit of invitation that Christ called us to live out.

We are called as Christians to a deep commandment of loving our God and loving our neighbor. I think all too often we think God can only save in the way we imagine, and we sometimes discard God’s power. Preachers and religious teachers have been the biggest culprits of this, we often rely on our own understanding to see where we think faith will go or how we can advance it. Simple people of faith instead have relied deeply on God’s grace through prayer, accountable groups of Christians

and study to let God work through them in their everyday lives. They let the pieces of God's love fill in the gaps of our imperfect compassion in their own soul, to be enveloped by a God who can adapt to the changing winds of time to partner with us. God really is trying to partner with us to save this world, to help it love mercy, seek justice and walk humbly together.

The second scripture for today comes from Exodus 32:1-20 it is the story of the people of God after they have left Egypt and when Moses has gone up the mountain to talk to God. I often turn to this scripture when I am struggling to understand how God responds when we don't seem to quite understand where God is leading us. I also think it highlights trouble for those who tell us who God thinks is in, and who is out.

Exodus 32 Common English Bible (CEB)

32 The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't have a clue what has happened to him."

I am going to stop right here for a hot second. A couple things to remind you as a preview. God is going to be a key character in a minute, cause he and Moses are having a chat. Moses has spent too long on the mountain as you can see and the people are getting impatient, and they turn to Aaron. Let me remind you Aaron is the one who always does the talking for Moses, and Aaron, like most of us, has grown used to trying to make the people feel good about themselves. To give the people a little credit, some commentaries point out that when it says, "Make us gods..." the Hebrew word for God and multiple gods is the same. Very likely they are impatient of waiting for God's clarification, and they want Aaron to take care of it now. Aaron

may be taking part in the first heresy of fake news here, by trying to preempt the real news from God by what he is about to say.¹

² Aaron said to them, “All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!” ⁶ They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

Now before I get to Moses and God, let me remind you that gods and God are the same word in Hebrew. So, we can very much conclude Aaron is just trying to fill in the gaps, and make sure that the people know God is with him. Perhaps the only thing that should concern us, is he is making quite a show of it. Feasting, drinks and burning things sounds more like a college party, and less like Aaron is just trying to help the people stay focused on God.

⁷ The Lord spoke to Moses: “Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything! ⁸ They’ve already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They’ve bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” ⁹ The Lord said to Moses,

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1069

“I’ve been watching these people, and I’ve seen how stubborn they are. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I’ll make a great nation out of you.”

Alright I know this one, I have felt like this at times. You see a group of people just destroying everything you all are working towards together. Decisions are not being made well, people are struggling to agree. Someone comes up with an idea, and it is the best way to solve it, but now one prays about it. Then a bad decision gets made and you want to send someone else in to talk to the people, and you want to sit there and be mad. I call this middle school mad, cause in middle school you always use someone else to relay your feelings to someone else. You send your friend to tell so and so you have a crush them, or if you are mad you passively make sure the friend you have who is friends with the person you are mad at knows about it. God knows how to have anger and hold on to it is to stay in your mad, to hold up somewhere else. It is much easier for your mad to stay your own mad, if you can keep it to yourself and imagine how awful the people making you mad are.

Not only that, but you probably didn't catch it when God says, “your people.” He does not say my people, he literally dismembers the people of God from connection with God. In the Hebrew there is a correlation between what is said here and what God says just before flooding the earth for Moses. There is a desire to wipe the slate clean and start over in this anger, another reaction we all get to have when we have our righteous anger by ourselves. God is violent here and I often find myself questioning who God is in this scene. This God makes me quiver and shake, and wonder why follow God if God just saves to punish. I have seen what dismembering looks like in real life. It is like what happens when loved ones with dementia no longer remember their family, it is not a pleasant feeling to watch as the memories that bind people together lost. When you see mothers forget

their children, husbands their wives, and grandparents their grandchildren. People suffering dementia don't do this willingly and it hurts awful. Imagine what is like when God is ready to willingly let the people be forgotten, let go, and be anything but saved or even remembered by their God.

¹¹ But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, “Lord, why does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth’? Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, ‘I’ll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I’ve promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.’”

Moses might be the first Public Relations(PR) Director. God you know I get your mad, and the people are not really following you right now, but let me just say brining people out of Egypt and making them smoldering marks on the mountainside might not get you the reviews you were hoping for. Moses breaks the script, he doesn't let the happenings around Noah repeat. He reminds God that when the people were lost in a terrible place that God chose a relationship with them. Moses, the man who told God he would rather not lead his people out of Egypt because he was not a good public speaker, convinces God that a relationship with God's people is more important than being right. Then comes my favorite line of this passage.

¹⁴ Then the Lord changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people.

I heard a colleague preach on this who said, “I went to a Presbyterian Theology School and I loved this line. Presbyterians are all about the unchangeable nature of God, every time they brought it up I would bring out this line. It also resulted in very short conversations in seminary too.”

This line of scripture is critical, God changed his mind. He chose not to dismember or disengage from relationship, he turned back into it. This may be the single most important thing to learn from the early parts of the Bible, God keeps turning back into relationship with people. They reject God, and God comes back to try the relationship again.

¹⁵ Moses then turned around and came down the mountain. He carried the two covenant tablets in his hands. The tablets were written on both sides, front and back. ¹⁶ The tablets were God’s own work. What was written there was God’s own writing inscribed on the tablets. ¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “It sounds like war in the camp.”

¹⁸ But Moses said,

“It isn’t the sound of a victory song.

It isn’t the sound of a song of defeat.

The sound of party songs is what I hear.”

¹⁹ When he got near the camp and saw the bull calf and the dancing, Moses was furious. He hurled the tablets down and shattered them in pieces at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ He took the calf that they had made and burned it in a fire. Then he ground it down to crushed powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

Moses comes down the mountain with two tablets, front and back. This was a lot of time God spent writing, these aren’t

single sided documents, God did front and back. Joshua, Moses' companion, and the future leader of the people, says, "It sounds like they are fighting down there." Moses knows better, he has experience from leading the people he says, "Actually, it sounds like a party to me." The people are dancing around their calf calling it God, the real sin here isn't the idol is that they have assumed they know where God will show up, instead of waiting on God to be present for them.

Moses is so furious he smashes the tablets, God's work communicating to the people his intent for a relationship is smashed.

Moses doesn't leave it there, he takes the golden calf and melts it down and grinds it to a powder. Moses is about the object lesson for God's people. Then he mixes it with water and has the people drink it. Now if you are a parent, you have probably had a kid swallow a penny and some of us may have ended up in the ER and the doc says what? That's right it will come out, don't worry it will come out the other end.

Here is the thing about losing the gold this way though, it will come out. Chances are too, the people will learn not to look for God in places God is not. Because getting the gold back is not something any of them are going to want to try.

This lesson in Exodus parallels our parable from Matthew we are studying as we consider what Grace means for us. The landowner at the end says, "Are you envious because I am generous?" This is an echo to God's change of heart in Exodus, and a reminder that even when it seems things are at their worst, God has turned back into the people to provide for them. A reminder to us too, that while we often think we deserve more riches, in truth we are provided enough by God to meet today. And anything extra we acquire we should give thanks to God and seek to share with our neighbor.

Another pastor once was thanked by a person who had prayed with in prison. The thanks was for helping him to find God. The pastor was quite uncomfortable with this. He said, “Tracy prayed when he got in prision, when he called me, and when I was not present. I believe God was with him through the arrest, the trial, and continues alongside of him. At the moment was Tracy decided to accept God’s love I just happened to be a physical representation of Christ love.”²

The narrow gate we enter to follow God is not about whether I get into heaven or not. It is not about my friend’s grandma getting into heaven. Instead it is a reminder that if we walk through the narrow gate, we place ourselves in a place to physically help God be present to God’s people. This is not something we do, but God is generous with his grace filling in the gaps that are left when we make mistakes and working through his followers to remind us where God is.

In the book “If God is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World” the authors share this quote about the goal of Christianity: “Growing up, I was asked repeatedly, ‘If you were to die tonight, where would you spend eternity?’ I was never asked, “if you love tomorrow, what kind of life will it be?”³

Friends go from here and ask yourself, “if you love tomorrow, what kind of life will it be?”

² Gulley, P., & Mulholland, J. (2004). *If grace is true: Why God will save every person*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco. Adapted from a story on page 145

³ This quote comes from pg. 97 of the paperback version. http://www.amazon.com/If-God-Love-Rediscovering-Ungracious/dp/0060816155/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_y