

Shiloh United Methodist Church

True Grace: The Persistence of God

Matthew 20:1-16

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Psalm 89:2, 2 Timothy 2:13

Matthew 18:22

True Grace Video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuG4VquIKUc>

We have been studying God's grace and the nature of God's grace for the past few weeks. One of the main things we have been looking for is a definition of grace that Jesus helped to define. The first week we learned the nature of God is to give us enough for each day, and we have also learned part of what grace means is that God, despite other options, keeps turning back to the imperfect creation with love. And today on our final Sunday of learning what Grace is about I want to invite us to focus on how God persists to have a relationship of Grace with us.

2 Timothy 2:13 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹³ If we are disloyal, he stays faithful”

because he can't be anything else than what he is.

Psalm 89:2 Common English Bible (CEB)

² That's why I say,

“Your loyal love is rightly built—forever!

You establish your faithfulness in heaven.”

God persists in relationship with us, even when we deny God. We have been working hard to develop a definition of Grace this series and what I find is that the more I study Grace the longer my definition becomes. Not only that, but God's choice to turn back to me in my own mistakes and failings continues to add stories to my own definition.

In the New Testament we often see Grace defined with the word “love.” “God loves us” is a definition of grace, that despite our mistakes or our sense of failing God continues to turn back into us. As Christians we have Jesus stories and life to also reflect the image of this love to us, one that persists and returns even when we feel we have failed the world or those around us. The writers of the New Testament did not write it in English, they wrote it in Greek. In Greek there is a multitude of words for love and they vary in the kind of connected relationship that exists.

Philia – Love of an acquaintance, you love your barista who makes good coffee for you.

Philos – Brotherly/Sisterly is the love you have for those close to you, those who are siblings or are connected as siblings. A love you would defend the other for.

Eros – Is the hot love that exists between lovers, and would be the infatuation love we hear about in love stories.

However, the Greek word for love used to describe God and Jesus’ love for us in the New Testament is most frequently “Agape.” This love is love that is deep, wide, forgiving, and never-ending love. This is the love that we as Christians has the ability to overcome evil things in this world, to overpower those pieces in our lives that keep us from God, and remind us we are God’s children and we are enough without anything added.

This love is the multiplicitous love that forgives and reconnects us to what Jesus talks about in:

Matthew 18:22 Common English Bible (CEB)

²² Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.

This is a love that redeems criminals, those who make mistakes, and the forgotten. It is a love that invites us to grow and convinces us the love of God, grace is worth sharing.

I want to invite us to watch a short video clip from *Les Miserable*, in this clip the main protagonist, Jean Valjean has been forced into desperate poverty and is in the midst of a burglary when we find him. Pay attention to the Bishop, his courageous wife, and Jean Valjean as you watch this clip.

Watch this clip - <https://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/les-miserables/back-to-god>

I love this clip, it reminds me what happens when I forget Grace. God persists, as many times as in our parable we are studying God came back and found more workers and invited them to share in the Grace planting. Then at the end of the day God comes back and pays everyone the same amount of Grace. For Jean Valjean the Bishop ransoms him from his bent towards the awful ways of poverty and reminds him with more silver, that his soul is worth more than the goods in the Bishop's house. The fieldworkers in the parable are upset when people who worked less got the same, they said it was unfair. Yet, we know that God gave one denarius which was enough for each to live on for one day. The other line I want to highlight is that Jesus said in our translation, "Are you unhappy because I am generous?" The Greek actually says, "Friend, are you unhappy because I am generous?" The landowner uses this title to say, when we are frustrated it takes more grace to save another, that we are still a friend of God.

This is hard though...it is easier to be mad when others receive what seems more special treatment, get more of their share. However, Christ calls us to remember in the last line of the parable of the workers, that the last will be first and first will be last. Fairness matters only in that we as disciples are called to help reconcile all of creation back to God.

In my own life when I look for Grace it is in my wife Crystal's work that I see an embodiment of Christ's understanding of

Grace so clearly defined. Especially clear in her work is the need for the church to exemplify God's Grace. Crystal is a mental health therapist who works with children. At one point she took components of her many clients and created a fictitious young woman named, Rachel. Rachel is not real, but pieces of her story represent many different children's struggles. I think Rachel's story exemplifies the need for Grace to be what saves us and reconciles us to God, and especially and a Agape "all encompassing" Grace that wraps its love around everyone and all creation. This story is one reason I believe our God will save everyone and that we are called to be part of this work as Christian people.

Now, let me introduce you to Rachel. Rachel is the second of three children. When she was born, her parents were married and looked pretty average to their family, friends, and faith community. This lasted until shortly after her first birthday, when Rachel's dad was laid off his job and coped with the stress by abusing drugs. He became physically violent towards Rachel's mom and her older brother. They lost their home and for nearly three years, her Rachel's life was filled with domestic violence, homelessness, and neglect.

On Rachel's fourth birthday, her mom took her and her siblings to a restaurant to celebrate. While there, they ran into a friend of her mom's, who questioned Rachel's brother about bruising on his face and neck. He was too scared to answer, but Rachel's mom burst into tears as she described the violent attack by Rachel's dad. Overwhelmed by guilt and fear, Rachel's mom said she was going to the bathroom and left the restaurant through the back door. The servers were delivering Rachel's free dessert and singing "Happy Birthday" when a police officer showed up.

Rachel and her siblings were placed in foster care, alongside 1,800 other Montana children. Her brother was six, she was four, and her sister was not quite two. Her parents were given a court ordered treatment plan to address their substance abuse and mental health needs. Rachel remained in foster care for two years. During this time, she had 3 different caseworkers. Each time the worker changed, phone calls went unreturned, court deadlines were delayed, and a bit more of Rachel's story was lost.

While waiting for a decision to be made about her future, Rachel lived in 3 different foster homes. She was in her first foster home for 2 months before her dad showed up one night in the yard. He was clearly intoxicated or high on drugs and was threatening to kill the family for "stealing his kids." Rachel was immediately placed in a new foster home, and stayed there for 9 months before the foster family moved out of state. Her third foster home only had room for Rachel and her younger sister.

Through the tumult of the previous four years, Rachel and her sister moved into the third home and stayed there for a little over a year while her mom completed the requirements with social services needed to regain custody. Rachel's dad never followed through with his substance abuse treatment and a permanent order of protection was filed with the court. Rachel & her siblings moved back in with her mom on her 6th birthday, and she was relieved that the singing and cake were forgotten in the hustle of paperwork and belongings and goodbyes.

Rachel was glad to be back with her mom, but wary of her ability to parent. Over the last four years, Rachel had been the most consistent person in her baby sister's life. Now that they were back with mom, Rachel would frequently fake illness to stay out of school and be home with her sister. While Rachel's mom wanted the best for her kids, she struggled with depression. When she worked, she struggled to find safe childcare. When she quit, she felt overwhelmed by financial burdens. She isolated from others. Stopped answering the phone when the school called about her son's behavior concerns.

Her mother let Rachel take care of the cooking and cleaning. While the arrangement had its problems, it kept Rachel busy enough to avoid the anger, confusion, and fear that had built up over the last five years. Rachel could keep it all bottled up—except around her birthday. Then, the memories of mean daddy and restaurant police visits made the feelings too big to ignore.

On her 8th birthday, Rachel's teacher led the class in a round of "Happy Birthday." Rachel began to scream at the top of her lungs, begging them to stop. Confused, the well-meaning teacher stepped in to contain Rachel's flailing and screaming and got an elbow to her face for her trouble. Sent to the principal's office, Rachel refused to talk and remained silent for the next two hours. During those two hours, the staff started to talk to each other about the girl who had flown under the radar. Rachel wasn't a behavior concern. But she had no friends. She didn't make eye contact with adults. She snuck food from the garbage during lunch. No one saw this outburst coming because no one really saw Rachel. Rachel had become skilled at hiding her pain and

trauma, and an overburdened school system cooperated in Rachel's avoidance.

Instead of calling home, the staff called in the school-based therapist. And while Rachel didn't talk the rest of the day, she did play. She sat in the therapy office, diapering and feeding and cuddling the baby dolls. The therapist didn't talk either, but she did create space for Rachel to feel just brave enough to return to school the next day. Rachel went home and told her mom about the baby dolls. Her mom listened, and agreed to get Rachel on the waiting list for therapy. That was a year ago. Three months ago, Rachel finally started therapy. It has taken so long for Rachel to start getting the type of help that will really bring healing to her deep hurts.

Today, Rachel turns nine and still hates her birthday. But hopefully, by working hard in therapy, she'll begin to understand why. She will learn what it means to battle Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and how to feel her anger and worry and sadness without being consumed by them. Her mom will work in family therapy to learn about parenting an angry, worried, and sad kid instead of a perfect, quiet, sneaky kid. The ending to Rachel's story isn't a happily ever after. But it is an opportunity. For her and for each of us.¹

Crystal's final words are the key, "But it is an opportunity. For her and for each of us." The key to the parable we have been studying, the key to Grace, the key to following Christ, is that we are characters in the story. We are called to live into the story. We are called to be Rachel,

¹ <http://www.intermountainministry.org/advocating-for-rachel-part-2-guest-contributor-crystal-amundson/>

or Jean Valjean, we are called to be one of the workers in the field. We might be the early worker, diligent in share God's Grace and love, offended at the blatant sharing of enough with the worker that just showed up. We might at times be the worker who sat around all day, or got caught up in some other evil or hurt, and God still says you have a place in this work of planting in our field where we hope to one day harvest hope, love and yes Grace for all of the children of God.

Despite every effort we make to turn away from God, God persists until we are convinced of God's love and our worth. Then, in turn, many are compelled to go share that love with others.

People of God as we end this Christian year, and begin the journey with Christ into Advent and a year of following Christ, may we trust that we are Easter people who trust that God's Grace will be given, to us and to all, that it will be enough, more than enough for the harvest of God's love to be plentiful and grand.

Go in the peace of Christ my friends.

Shalom and Amen