

“Unfair Grace”

Deut. 24:17-22; Matt. 10:40-42

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – January 20, 2011

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden
MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

Copyright: 2011, I. Peden

=====

In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Lucy is walking home from school with Charlie Brown, carrying her report card in her hand. She turns to Charlie, and, in self-righteous indignation, complains: “It isn’t fair Charlie Brown, it just isn’t fair! I studied for a whole week for my final math test and Sally only studied for two hours the night before the test and she got an A, but I only got a C. It just isn’t fair!”

The movie *Amadeus* is the story of the great musical genius, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The movie portrayed Mozart as a rather eccentric, almost schizophrenic genius who, without question, was a very gifted musician and composer. Another composer, the devout Salieri, despised Mozart and considered him immature, flippant, arrogant and obnoxious. Why should Mozart be such a gifted musician and composer when he didn’t deserve it? After all, Salieri saw himself as the Lord’s servant, in obedience to Jesus Christ, and thought to himself: “Why shouldn’t Christ give me this gift instead of Mozart? I am a better person and I deserve it!”

In a moment of despair, Salieri feels that Christ has forsaken him, so he removes his crucifix down from the wall and burns it. Salieri could not live with God’s love and grace. He wanted fairness and justice; he wanted from God what he thought he had worked for, earned and deserved. How many times have we said or heard others say, “It just isn’t fair!”

Jennifer Jones won an Academy Award for the title role in the movie *The Song of Bernadette*. The story line goes something like this: Bernadette receives a vision of the Immaculate Conception and has become quite a celebrity. An older nun is consumed with envy toward young Bernadette. In vaguely subdued anger the nun prays to God, “Why her? No one has prayed harder, worked longer, suffered greater than I. Why her and not me?”

Later in the movie Bernadette collapses while scrubbing the floor. After his examination, the doctor talks to the older nun. “Has she never complained?” “No, she just quietly does her work.” The doctor continues, “That’s amazing. The affliction she has, she has had a very long time. The pain is unbearable.” Later the older nun prays, “God, forgive me. Thank you for the opportunity of serving the one you have chosen.”

Let's face it there are times when we have trouble with "grace," especially when it is extended to those whom we consider undeserving. How easy it is to be envious when someone else gets recognition, or some provision, or a raise, or the limelight, or receives something we thought only we should get or had a right to. Are we sometimes envious when God is generous to others? Unfair?

The Bible is full of examples of seemingly unfair situations. Let me cite a few examples: God chose Jacob the manipulator, liar, and cheat over his dutiful brother Esau. God chose a runty shepherd boy instead of his strong and handsome brothers. Job, a pious and good living man, suffered the loss of everything he owned – his property, his stock and his children. Jesus chose to have dinner with a thief and cheat named Zaccheus instead of the religious people like the Pharisees and temple officials. After watching a widow drop two puny coins into the temple collection buckets, Jesus said that the widow's pennies were worth more than a rich person's millions. Unfair?

What about Jesus' story of the prodigal son? A feast was prepared for a disgraceful, runaway son when he returned home after wasting all his inheritance? Nothing was given to the older son who had worked hard and faithfully while his brother had gallivanted around having a good time. Fred Craddock once tinkered with the details of this parable in a sermon and had the father slip the ring and robe on the *older* brother, then kill a fatted calf in honor of his years of faithfulness and obedience. When Craddock did this, a woman in back of building called out, "*That's the way it should have been written!*" Did you ever feel that way? Upset when someone else got off easy? Bitter when someone didn't get what they deserved, but instead received so much better than their actions merited? Unfair?

After a life of wickedness, the thief on the cross alongside Jesus made a last minute confession and Jesus promised that he would be saved. That hardly seems fair! Do you get the picture? A theme that runs through the Bible is that God is unfair. In fact, we could shout, "That's unfair" as we turn over page after page.

So, let's be honest with one another this morning: we don't always like grace because it is unfair and we seem to be overly preoccupied with the idea of fairness. We have an innate sense of justice, fairness, and egalitarianism; and so when things don't seem fair to us, we're quick to get a strong sense of righteous indignation and want to do something about the

offensive unfairness. If the truth be told, we don't really want fairness and justice where God is concerned. What we so easily forget is that if God treated us how we deserve to be treated, for many of us there could be a scary outcome. As it stands, however, we receive God's grace through Jesus Christ and all of our sins are not counted against us because Jesus already paid the price on our behalf. Grace isn't fair, that's true. But we don't really want what is "fair," do we? After all, we're getting a much better deal than "fair."

It is so easy for us to forget this and be *un-gracious* to those around us and fail to be agents of God's grace. All too quickly we fail to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness. We fail to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people. As United Methodists, we are well indoctrinated to believe a good theology of grace. But often that's not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace does not seem to penetrate the level of our emotions. If we truly understand God's grace, then we'll live it out in our lives and extend grace to others on a daily basis. And this is what Rob Bell's dvd called *Corner* is about. Some of us viewed it on Wednesday night.

Bell does an effective job of communicating what is expected of the followers of Jesus Christ. "When we empower others," Bell says, "when we extend grace to others, in their oppression – whatever that may look like – we find out about the grace that God has extended to us."

Now what does a grace-extending life look like? How should we practice grace in our every-day lives? Here's a suggestion about how we can practice grace with others. First, we recognize everything we have as a gift of God, and then we try to put it to use in a way that is beneficial to others and pleasing to God. Our motivation and attitude is what's most important to God, when we share our wealth and blessings with others. How often God reminded God's people of this fact! Last week we heard Elaine Rabon remind us of how God spoke through the prophet Micah in these words: *And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* (Micah 6:8). This is what the Lord *requires*: a heart that is humble and willing to show mercy to others, to be fair and honest in our personal relationships and private matters.

We read in Deuteronomy 24 this morning that God told God's people: *Do not deprive the immigrant or the orphan of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.* How easy it

would have been for a citizen of Israel to take advantage of people from a foreign land and regard them as threats to God's people? What legal rights or obligations could they claim? None! They were virtually helpless and defenseless. A woman whose husband had died was in a similar position, especially if she had no children to care for her.

God made some special provisions for these people, and at the same time designed a way for his children to demonstrate their love, even if that meant foregoing their legal rights and claims. God set forth these laws and instructed his people to purposely leave behind a portion of their crops that they were harvesting. God told them: *When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the immigrant, the orphan and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the immigrant, the orphan and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the immigrant, the orphan and the widow.*

"It isn't fair," you say, "it's my vineyard; it's my olive grove; it's my field. Why should I let these people come onto my property and take what I've worked so hard to produce? That's not fair!" Bell says, "Exactly. Because being rescued from slavery in Egypt wasn't fair. Liberation isn't fair. Redemption isn't fair. Grace isn't fair."

You might call these instructions in Deuteronomy part of God's welfare program in Israel, and yes, it did serve to take care of the social needs of 'the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow'— people whose circumstances called for the mercy and compassion of others. You notice, too, God wasn't saying: *Harvest everything and then deliver it to them.* The Lord urged the people to leave some of their crops behind, so these others could come and harvest what they needed. In other words, God wasn't encouraging laziness and irresponsibility. God was encouraging God's people whom he had blessed so richly to — in Bells' words, "leave a corner" — to take into consideration those around them who were in need. By leaving behind these portions, they expressed their love for God. In faith and love, they could put the needs of others before their own, trusting that the Lord would still be able to provide everything they needed.

Bell says: "We leave a corner because in helping save someone else from suffering, we may in the process find ourselves being saved. From indifference. From the inertia of inaction. From taking what we have for granted." One day God in human flesh made this message

unambiguously clear: *Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* (John 13:35). It was the night that Jesus, God's own Son, was betrayed.

What if you and I were Hebrew people in the first century? For twelve centuries, give or take a day or two, we have been God's chosen people – like a “teacher's pet!” We received the word of God, observed it, recorded it, kept it, interpreted it, and suffered because of it. Now all of a sudden we are no longer seen as God's only special people – teacher's pet with all its merited and favored status. God wants to let other folks in on the deal who haven't paid the price we have paid! And they will have the same status and rights and privileges before God! Unfair! God extending grace to *them* is so unfair!

After all, notice how funny they look and dress and eat. What's more, they smell bad! They are so different from us! They know nothing about our sanitary rules, our liturgical procedures, our sacrificial system, our Hebraic Law! They don't know an introit from a benediction, and now we have got to let *them* in? Is that fair? And if we let them in, where is it going to stop? If we open the door to *them*, one day we will have to let in those who wave their hands in worship, or those who practice faith healing, and some may even not believe in infant baptism! Now I ask you, “Is that fair?”

God is generous, full of grace, and forgiving. God gives gifts; God doesn't give according to what we deserve. God gives generously because of who God is and not because of whom we are. We are sinners, rebels against God. Much of humankind's behavior was and still is displeasing to God. But God didn't give up on us. God gave us God's Son rather than give up on humanity. Jesus died for all humankind. The death of Jesus was unfair but that was God's grace at work.

Philip Yancey calls this *the new math of grace*. When we go shopping, all our purchases are added up and we have to pay. If God did that, we couldn't afford all that we owe. God doesn't calculate what we deserve but is generous and forgiving. I will end with some of Bell's concluding comments on his dvd: “So may we come to see that grace isn't fair. Redemption isn't fair. Liberation isn't fair. And may we extend this unfairness to others ... May we find somebody who needs what we have, only to discover that they have what we needed all along.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.