

May 1, 2016

God Provides
Exodus 16:2-4, 13-21

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We are a missional church.

Emblazoned in big black letters in the lounge, those words shape every part of our life as a church.

But that word, mission, has militaristic overtones. It implies a desire to accomplish something. So I was wondering this week: what is it that the church works to accomplish?

During World War II, some American soldiers took the body of their buddy to a local cemetery. The priest stopped them saying, "You can't bury your friend here if he is not a Catholic." Discouraged but not defeated, the boys buried their fellow soldier just outside the cemetery fence.

After the war they came back to pay their respects but they could not find the grave. They questioned the priest about it, and he said, "The first part of the night I stayed awake disturbed by what I had told you. The second part of the night I spent moving the fence."

Grace is the Christian doctrine. It is what separates Christianity from every other religion on the planet, and over the past two thousand years has shaped the work of the church as much as its theology. But that impact isn't without its baggage.

We understand grace analogously, as the cosmic moving of the fences or the father welcoming home the prodigal son – but then we watch a bird dip and weave on the wind, and we remark at its grace in the same way we watch the results of a professional athlete's years of practice in action as he skates past the defenders. We laugh as someone stumbles over the corner of a rug and call them graceless. And all of it begs the question: how well do we understand this crucial idea?

Or to put it another way: does the way we think about Grace out there affect the way we think about Grace in here?

They say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing in the same way and expecting different results. And so while week after week preachers around the world stand up here and tell you about an amazing Grace – yet we still struggle to understand it. So this morning I want to try a different approach. This morning I want to talk about what Grace isn't.

Because Grace isn't goodness.

It's not being nice.

It's not even being Canadian.

Grace as its always been defined is unmerited favour. And so Grace cannot be less than that, but it has to be more than that. Because if someone shows up at your door hungry and you feed them, that's great – but it's not grace. That's kindness.

But if that same man robs you and then you feed him anyway, that is grace.

Grace always has to have an element of ridicule to it.

That's why Jesus' earliest biographers called their stories Gospels - Good News. They were announcements, proclaiming the sensational headline that Grace changes everything.

A good headline is supposed to make you curious.

Man eats own underwear to beat breathalyzer test – is a good headline.

Army Jeep disappears after being painted with camouflage – is a good headline.

Ontario Police called to domestic disturbance between man and parrot – is a good headline.

Hearing the announcement of the Gospel should have as much impact on us as reading those headlines – and so there has to be more to it than God loves you, be a good person.

But here's the other thing that Grace isn't.

It's not equal. The way Grace appears to you is always going to be different from the way Grace appears to me. Sometimes Grace is crystal clear – an intersection of coincidences too great to deny; and sometimes it's only witnessed in the rear-view – a diagnoses that changed your outlook on life or the arrival of a child you weren't expecting. Grace appears differently because we're subjective people. We're shaped by thousands upon thousands of small moments and so everything from the way you sign your name to the time you got up this morning plays a part in the way God reveals his Grace in your life.

Sometimes the Grace is common.

It's common because God's love is universal

And it's grace because God's judgement is too.

Common Grace is Grace that God bestows on everyone equally. It's the sunrise and the changing seasons. Common Grace is Jesus' observation that God makes rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. It's God's covenant with Noah that never again will God destroy the whole

world. It's the most famous verse in the New Testament – for God so loved the whole world that he gave his one and only son.

Common Grace is life in its broadest form and how much must it break God's heart when day after day, and sunrise after sunrise He reminds us of his character and just how deep his love is and still we mill about like our plans and priorities are all that matter. But that's what makes it Grace.

Sometimes Grace is special.

It's special because it is God's.

It's grace because it is unique.

Special Grace is Grace that God withholds. It is the Grace of the parables – equal payment for unequal work in the vineyard; a wedding feast for the poor and lame; the welcome of the prodigal. It's God's relationship with Israel, his protection and provision and it's the Holy Spirit moving upon individuals in the church.

It's God working through Scripture and the Sacraments, proclaiming that there is no other name but Jesus that has power to save. Special Grace is the story of God unfolding with power and authority for every part of your life – not because of the words on the page, but because of the Spirit who continues to speak through them. And it's the reminder from this table that the same God that speaks through scripture moves among us here today.

And sometimes Grace is an agency.

Agency Grace is Grace that God bestows through common means for special circumstances

It's agent because God uses specific things for specific moments

And it's grace because he uses us.

Agent Grace is the church at work. It's the small church selling its building and sponsoring a refugee family; it's the dying church seeing itself as soil from which a replant can spring; it's the Bible study that meets faithfully even though no one else seems interested. Agent grace is the mom who is exhausted volunteering for one more activity at church; it's the grandparent asking how they can help; it's the increase in the offering plate when there's another round of layoffs that hasn't hit you.

It's God working through me and you and then turning around and working through us together.

There are a lot of things that Grace is not. But let me share with you this morning five things that Grace is.

Grace is

God's Riches at Christ's Expense.

That's it.

The bread and quail that greeted Israel through their wanderings had nothing to do with who they were or what they'd done. They didn't earn it. It was God's unmerited favour to them – but here's the catch: because they didn't earn it, they didn't get to keep it.

That's the moral of Exodus 16. The things that God provides for you aren't for you to keep. We come into the world with exactly as much stuff as we leave with.

And so if that's the case, then the question becomes – not: how do I get more stuff, but how do I do more with the stuff that I have?

Think about it: Jesus didn't tell the disciples to pray and say – God, give me enough that I can become self sufficient. He said give us this day our daily bread, because he expected that tomorrow and every day after we would pray the same prayer. Self reliance isn't a Christian virtue, as much as we might want it to be in the twenty-first century. But reliance on God is.

So over the weeks of May we're looking at this theme through the lens of this question: What does it mean to rely on God? What do we rely on him for, and what does reliance on him look like?

So it starts at the table. It's here that we come to find our nourishment and find reliance on God in the thumbnail of bread and the thimble of grape juice. The meal isn't supposed to fill our bellies; it is supposed to make us hungry again soon for more of God.

This table is a reminder of God's gracious provision in our lives. Common, Special and agent grace – all given freely ... all given as God's Riches at Christ's Expense.

So here's the deal.

The fact that Calgary is hurting isn't news to anybody here. EI claims are up 91% over a year ago. Last year more than 140,000 Calgarians came into the Food Bank – and almost half of them were children. Provisions to the Food Bank are down over last year but requests are up

by 30% and that number is only expected to go up. So when the Mission Team asked if there was anything that we could do to help our community, the Food Bank invited us to partner with them. Everyone thinks about the Food Bank at Christmas, but as Spring gives way to summer, the needs are greater than ever. So over the month of May we're asking you to fill the food bank's coffers; not with money, though you can give financially if you want – but with food. Underneath your seat is a bag with the Food Bank's most requested items. We're asking you to bring that bag filled as many times as you are able.

If you're wondering how you're going to put food on your own table next week, this isn't a challenge for you. But if the stories about a hurting city break your heart then here's the question I want you to consider: over the month of May can your contributions to the Food Bank square the number of people in your home? Can you double it? Or Can you match it?

All of us fit somewhere in one of those categories. So here's the challenge. Figure out which category you're in, and then shoot for the one above you. We're going to be accepting donations here at the church from Sunday to Friday throughout the month of May. You can bring in your donations any time in that period.

So for now, let the bread of life nourish and sustain you – and bring you with both feet into the mission of Grace to which God calls us.

Amen.