

Believing in God's Grace
"A New Creation" – Unit 1: Session 4
April 29, 2018

"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work.

³ "At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. ⁴ So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. ⁵ So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing.

⁶ "At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?'

⁷ "They replied, 'Because no one hired us.'

"The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.'

⁸ "That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. ⁹ When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. ¹⁰ When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. ¹¹ When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, ¹² 'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.'

¹³ "He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? ¹⁴ Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. ¹⁵ Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?'

¹⁶ "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last."

Matthew 20:1-16 (NLT)

This morning we are concluding the first part of our series entitled *A New Creation*, the first section on "Believing." Believing in God, Believing in Jesus, and Believing in the Holy Spirit, all three being foundational to our faith as Christians. At first thought, our fourth one, as we follow the curriculum set out for us by Palmer Becker, might feel a little out of place. Yes, "Believing in God's Grace," is important, but foundational? But the more I thought about it, the more I have become convinced that yes it is! Why, because it goes against our natural human tendencies.

We sing about God's grace all the time. "Amazing Grace," "Amazing Grace – Our Chains our Gone," other popular hymns like "Wonderful Grace of Jesus," "Marvelous Grace of our Loving Lord, and more contemporary songs like, "Your Grace is Enough," "Your Grace is Mine," "Grace and Nothing More," and on and on. We sing about God's Grace but do we really understand God's Grace, do we really believe in God's Grace?

What exactly is Grace?

Well it is a name, that a couple of people here have. If there ever was a name which might be hard to live up to, Grace might just be one of the toughest.

The Dictionary defines grace as “a way of moving that is smooth and attractive and that is not stiff or awkward.” By that definition, I do not have grace!

The Dictionary also defines grace as “a controlled, polite, and pleasant way of behaving, or skills that are needed for behaving in a polite way in social situations.” Well, by those definitions, sometimes I have grace, more often I do not. About the best I can say is I have more than I used to.

None of those definitions are what God’s grace is about.

The definition of God’s grace is:

- 1) Unmerited divine assistance given humans for their regeneration and sanctification.
- 2) A virtue coming from God.
- 3) A state of sanctification enjoyed through divine grace.

There is something very unique about God’s definition of grace that sets it apart from our earthy definition. Any thoughts or guesses after looking at the definition on your handout? God’s grace can only come from God.

Often we get the words mercy and grace confused. Mercy is defined as, “kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly.” That’s every single one of us human beings. Because of our sin nature we all deserve to be treated harshly but God chose to be merciful to us through the offering of his own Son, Jesus, as the atoning sacrifice of our sins, through faith in Him.

By God’s great mercy extended to us, we can extend mercy to other human beings. But Grace is a gift that only God can give.

The best description of God’s grace is found in Paul’s letter to the early Christians in Ephesus, otherwise known as Ephesians:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:1-10 (NIV)

By human standards God's grace does not make sense. By human standards *The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* makes no sense. You mean the workers whom the Landlord went out and got towards the very end of the day, and worked only for one hour, and at the coolest part of the day, are going to get the same reward as those who worked all day – most of it in the scorching heat? God's answer is yes! Why? Because it is all a gift from God. None of us deserve it and none of us can earn it! You can complain about it all you want and say it's not fair but it isn't going to do you any good. In fact complaining about it might even do you some harm, even to the point of risking the gift of grace that God has extended to you.

While God's grace and God's mercy are somewhat different, that said about God's mercy in the O.T., Exodus 33:19, and in the N.T., Romans 9:15, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy," is also true of God's grace, "I will give my gift of grace on whom I choose to give my gift of grace, where and when I choose."

Why did God choose Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Mary & Joseph, the twelve disciples, the apostle Paul? Why the Israelites over the Egyptians? Were the Israelites really less sinful than the Egyptians? I think not. God choosing the Israelites is an example of God's grace.

When it comes to God's grace there is one place in *The Parable of the workers in the vineyard*, where the parable breaks down? Any thoughts or guesses? Work! When it comes to God's grace, we can't work for it. That is what makes it a gift! But, the parable can be put back together again (just like Humpty Dumpty!), when you apply Jesus' answer to his disciples when they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?," found in John 6:29:

"The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." John 6:29 (NIV)

You see even our faith in Jesus as our Savior and Lord is a gift from God. It's hard for us to grasp that. We want so much to have done something on our own to earn our salvation. Perhaps nobody has put it better than 19th century preacher and writer Charles Spurgeon, in his book *All of Grace*:

"Remember this, or you may fall into error by fixing your mind so much upon the faith that is the channel of salvation that you forget the grace that is the fountain and source even of faith itself. Faith is the work of God's grace in us. No one can say that Jesus is the Christ [the Son of the living God] but by the Holy Spirit."

Then Jesus adds a little further along in the Gospel of John, chapter 6, "*No one can come to me,*" said Jesus, "*unless the Father who sent me draws him*" (John 6:44).

If we truly understood God's grace, the gift that he has given us, then there is no way that worship would not be a priority in our life and there is no way that we wouldn't want to share our faith story with others – because God might just be using me, or you, as his means of grace to draw others to Himself. It might be your children, grandchildren, the neighbor next door or across the street, the person who works in your same office, one of your classmates at school, the person you run into regularly when you're getting your cup of coffee . . . and on and on and on.

Other than for ourselves believing in Jesus Christ, the one whom God has sent, that is the primary task that God has given every single one of his children – sons and daughters in Christ. As Christians we have primary tasks and we have secondary tasks. Believing in Jesus, the one whom God has sent, and sharing our faith with others are primary tasks.

REVIVE vs. Revive Ohio, Revive Logan County, Revive Champaign County –

For the past 8 months, or so, the Elder Team, made up of the Pastors and Elders, has been participating in a training entitled REVIVE, in which we have assignments to read, videos to watch and we meet with the leaders via video conference once a month. There is one other local Mennonite church participating at the same time we are – Huber Mennonite Church in New Carlisle, west of Springfield.

Some people have been asking what's it all about? That's a good question! I'm not sure we really know what it is all about as of yet, though it has us thinking a lot, especially about how our culture has changed and how we should be doing church differently in the 21st century if we want to be obedient to Jesus' command to go out and make disciples from all peoples and nations. Our primary task is not to invite people to church, to bring people to church, our primary task is to help bring people to Christ.

One of the profound statements made by one of the presenters this past week was “you can't be sent to the church!” If you are a Christian, then you are the church. The church is sent out there, out into the world.

There has also been a lot in the news lately about an initiative called Revive Ohio, which is then being broken down into the counties where many churches are participating – a couple weeks ago it was “Revive Logan County” and in June it is going to be “Revive Champaign County.” Other than unfortunately having the same name – the REVIVE that we are participating in and Revive Ohio, Logan Co., and Champaign County are not connected in any way. The two initiatives have very different ways of going about trying to bring people to Christ. Not that one is right and one is wrong but they are quite different. Revive Ohio is much more direct, it is about going out and meeting people cold, praying for them and then asking them if they can share five or six specific verses from the Bible with them to hopefully help them make a commitment to Christ. The whole thing was bathed in prayer, worship, fellowship and it has been reported that more than 40 people made a commitment to Christ during the week in Logan County. Praise God! The prayer and hope is that the initiative will continue with the energy and excitement that has been created and that there will be follow up and work will be done to help those who made commitments to become disciples of Jesus.

The REVIVE initiative that the Elder Team is participating in is about learning how as a church we can become more missional in our own community – sharing not only the story of Jesus but also his character and doing the things that Jesus did during his life here on earth – like meeting people where they are at, helping the poor, the outcasts, the disenfranchised, not as strangers but in those places where we already live, work and play. It is about building relationships so that hopefully one day we can share about Jesus and the reason for the hope that we have. It is more intentional about making disciples, while we at the same time we are becoming better disciples

ourselves. Again, it is not saying that one of these ways is right and the other is wrong, but we felt that the one that we are participating in is more true to who we are as Anabaptists and takes into account where many non-Christians and un-churched people are at today. Many have a cautious view of the church at best and many, a rather negative and critical view at worse. We just felt that is where the Holy Spirit is leading us as a congregation. The decision was helped by the fact that we had already committed to our REVIVE training before Revive Ohio came along and we clearly felt we couldn't participate in both at the same time.

So, if you feel that you really want to learn more about what we as the Elder Team have been participating in over the past eight months, and you can't wait until our annual retreat at Camp Kirkmont in August, then on Saturday, May 19th, from 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. at Huber Mennonite Church in New Carlisle, we will be participating in a one day intensive which will kind of bring everything together what we have learned over the past eight months. There will be a guest speaker who just moved his family, his wife and three young daughters, to New York City, to Manhattan, to live because that is where he feels God is calling him to build relationships and to share the message and love of Jesus Christ. Howard Wagler from Journey Mennonite Church in South Hutchinson, Kansas, who is leading our training, will be there as well. Anyone and everyone is invited. Just let me or one of the elders know if you would like to attend.

That which the REVIVE training and Revive Ohio do have in common, that which fits with our lesson for today, is the need to share our stories. Our stories of how we have experienced God's grace in our lives. Everyone has a story! It doesn't matter if you have had a powerful conversion experience as an adult or you grew up in the church and have spent your entire life here, since a young child. Growing up in the church, with parents who passed down their faith, is a gift of God's grace.

I was trying to think how to end my message this morning and I was going to share my story, because my life story is all about God's grace. I have worked on my story over the years and I have shared my story with many of you. I mean when someone away from this church and community finds out my story, usually the first question they ask is "how did you go from being Roman Catholic, a police officer, divorced, to being a Mennonite Pastor?" I have no idea! That is all by God's grace!

Then I thought about the two people who passed this week and about their experience with God's grace. Two people who grew up in this church at almost the exact same time, more than 80 years ago. Jim Kauffman and Roselle Kauffman, not directly related, but like most Mennonites who grew up in that time period, I'm guessing somewhere along the way they were. But two lives that went in different directions. Jim seemed to stray from his faith for a while, a result of some of his own decisions and some things that affected him throughout his life. But at some point in his life he was able to find his way back to faith in Christ, and the grace that he was able to experience in the midst of his brokenness was very evident to me. There were only two things that he wanted to make sure I read at his service on Thursday, one of them being that passage from Ephesians 2. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*

Roselle was someone who never seemed to stray from her faith in Christ. She was a part of this church for her entire life. She was a huge part of the music ministry. She taught piano lessons to many people from the community her entire life. If my memory serves me right, and she does have it in her records, I think it was 630 students, Andrea Leichty Kauffman being her last official one. Right up until the very end Roselle was trying to grow in her faith – reading her Bible, listening to the church services on CD, and listening to sermons on the radio. Yet, Roselle, was someone who struggled accepting God’s grace. On several occasions she would say something to the effect, “I just don’t know if I have done enough or been good enough?” I thought to myself, “if she doesn’t know if she’s done enough or been good enough – I’m in trouble!” I had to keep reminding her it is not about what we’ve done, or ever could do, it’s about what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. It is about His work! That’s grace. It’s God’s gift to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

I am confident this morning that both Jim Kauffman and Roselle Kauffman are in a much better place today than they were just a week ago, all because of the work of God’s grace in their lives.

When I sent out the e-mail yesterday I really struggled putting on the title Praise and Prayer concern. Yes, it might be a prayer concern for us who are going to miss her and grieve her passing, but for Roselle, her long awaited prayer was answered. Roselle’s passing is really all praise. All praise, glory and honor to God.

The same for Jim. Besides the passage from Ephesians 2 that he wanted shared at his service on Thursday was the words to a hymn dating all the way back to 1883 by Daniel Whittle entitled “I Know whom I have Believed.”

1. I know not why God’s wondrous grace
To me He has made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.
 - **Refrain:**
**But “I know Whom I have believed,
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I’ve committed
Unto Him against that day.”**
2. I know not how this saving faith
To me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word
Wrought peace within my heart.
3. I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.

4. I know not what of good or ill
May be reserved for me,
Of weary ways or golden days,
Before His face I see.

5. I know not when my Lord may come,
At night or noonday fair,
Nor if I walk the vale with Him,
Or meet Him in the air.