

A Community of Grace

Psalm 103:8–14; Genesis 50:15–21; Matthew 18:21–35

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As a child growing up, one of the hymns I often heard sung in our church was “There is Joy in Serving Jesus.” I remember it was a favourite hymn not only of our pastor but even more so of many of the members of the church. It was usually the ladies - the mothers of the church - who would sing that hymn passionately and with deep feeling. “There is joy, joy, joy in serving Jesus...”

Those words have stayed with me over the years. Truly what a joy and privilege it is to serve Jesus, and what a joy and privilege it is to serve his church. And I have been serving the church for many years, in fact for 21 years this year, and if you are in the ministry with the right conviction and the right mindset and with a good heart, you will tremendously enjoy it, even if ministry itself is full of challenges.

And how time flies - it's now been nearly half a year since I have come to be your minister. Where did all that time go? I can tell you I'm having much fun here, it's been great, and I'm thrilled by what's been happening in terms of the enthusiasm and energy and hope and unity and camaraderie that I have seen and experienced so far in this church. I'm very grateful for all the wonderful people who make our church.

Every church has a kind of atmosphere. Every church has something that people notice when they first walk through the doors. The atmosphere of St Augustine's is one of warm welcome, grace and genuine care. In our recent parish survey and workshop discussions, one of the encouraging comments that came through again and again was that St Augustine's is a warm and welcoming church.

I thank God for that.

But, of course, that doesn't mean we are a perfect church or we don't have our struggles or challenges, or that we don't have room to grow. Every church does. Every relationship does. Friendships and fellowship don't happen automatically. Healthy relationships take time, humility, patience and hard work. And if a church is to be healthy, biblical, Christ-centred and grace-filled, there are certain qualities that must always remain at the very heart of its life together.

This morning we continue our series, "Being the Body of Christ," by reflecting on what it means to be "a community of grace."

Our two readings this morning - Psalm 103 and Matthew 18 - both begin in the same place. Before they teach us how to treat one another, they first teach us what God is like. Before we set our minds on how you and I can be people of grace, first we need to set our minds on how we have received grace from God, and there is something very freeing and profoundly empowering if you begin with the fact that the God we worship is a God of grace, a God who has dealt with us with compassionate and mercy. Because if the God we call our Heavenly Father and who worship is a God of grace and if we as his people have received amazing grace from him, then we would be people who will have the ability to extend grace to others.

Psalm 103 is one of the most beautiful descriptions of God's character in the whole Bible. "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." Then the writer continues, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities."

Don't you thank you for that - that he does not treat us as our sins deserve? Praise God for that!

And then come these magnificent words: "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

What wonderful words those are! What astonishing grace! Not only does our God not treat us as our sins deserve, but he actually removes our sins from us completely. I'll come back to this shortly.

Our reading from Matthew 18 wonderfully complements Psalm 103. Jesus tells a fascinating parable. A king decides to settle accounts with his servants. One servant is brought before him who owes an extraordinary amount - ten thousand talents, or as some translations put it, "ten thousand bags of gold."

Immediately we wonder how he accumulated such an enormous debt. I came across one writer who calculated the present-day value of ten thousand bags of value, and he put it at 1.6 billion US dollars! But perhaps that's not really the point of Jesus for this story, is it. Jesus deliberately chooses an imaginary large amount because he wants us to see that this servant owes a debt he has absolutely no ability and no possibility of repaying.

I don't want you to miss the important point that the servant being in such predicament is a picture of us. As fallen and sinful human beings we owe a debt before God that is too large we can never repay, and we stand legally obligated and liable to repay and to face the consequences of such a debt. We cannot rescue ourselves from such predicament. Unless the King has mercy upon us, we have no hope.

In the parable the servant falls on his knees before the king and begged, "Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything." It sounds sincere, but we know the man has no means to repay it. Even if he worked for the rest of his life, he could never repay such an enormous debt.

And that is what makes the king's response so astonishing. Instead of demanding payment, instead of punishing the servant, the king cancels the entire debt. Not part of it, but all of it. The servant walks away completely free. This sounds almost too good to be true, but that is exactly how God has dealt with us. We remember what Psalm 103 says: "as far the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us."

How can God simply cancel our debt? Well, God did not sweep our sins under the carpet and then decided that everything was okay. Our debt of sin was paid for by the costly sacrifice of the life of Jesus Christ at the cross. Grace is never cheap. It is wonderfully to us but it was infinitely costly to Christ. Our forgiveness was purchased by his death and secured by his resurrection.

And that is where our reflection on the church as a community of grace must begin. Because if God has treated us like that, how should we then treat one another. In this sinful world, and with our own sinful hearts, what can truly motivate us to forgive one another and show kindness to one another? Only this: that God himself has first shown immeasurable grace to us.

The reason Jesus told the parable in Matthew 18 is because Peter asked him a question. “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

I must confess – I find myself agreeing with Peter. Surely there must be a limit. If someone keeps offending you or hurting you, aren’t they taking advantage of your forgiveness? Doesn’t endless forgiveness encourage bad behaviour? Isn’t there a point where enough is enough? Peter’s question is actually remarkably generous. The rabbis of his day taught that forgiving someone three times was sufficient. Peter doubles that and adds one - seven, the number of completeness. Perhaps Peter expected Jesus to praise him for being generous. But Jesus surprises him: “I tell you, Peter, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Or, as some translations have it, “seventy times seven.”

If we kept a record of how many times we have forgiven someone until the number reaches 490, and then stop at 491, we would have completely missed the point. Jesus is saying, “Stop counting.” The number seventy times seven simply means unlimited forgiveness, radical forgiveness, outrageous forgiveness. Why? Because that is how God has forgiven us.

And that brings us to the heart of the parable. The real problem with the unforgiving servant is not simply that he refused to forgive someone else.

The real tragedy is that his experience of receiving radical forgiveness from the king has not changed his heart. The king had cancelled a debt he could never repay. He had been shown unbelievable grace. Yet almost immediately he refused to forgive a fellow servant who owes him comparatively very little.

Now this radical forgiveness that we are to show to others, just as we have radically been forgiven by God, does this mean that we ignore sin? Not at all. The context of the Matthew 18 parable is very important. Immediately before Peter asked his question, Jesus teaches his disciples how to deal with sin within the church. He tells them to lovingly confront a brother or sister who sins, and to seek repentance and restoration.

So Jesus is not telling us to pretend nothing has happened. He is not telling us to ignore wrongdoing. He is certainly not telling us to enable abuse or allow evil to continue unchecked. Rather he's teaching us to confront sin lovingly, seek reconciliation where possible, establish wise boundaries where necessary and yet always maintain a heart that is ready to forgive.

I once knew a Christian whose adult son struggled with addiction. Over many years he repeatedly lied to her, stole from her and broke promises to change. Every time he expressed genuine sorrow, she forgave him. But eventually she realised that continuing to give him money was helping him to destroy himself. So she said to him, "You are always welcome in my home. I will always love you. I will always forgive you. But I will no longer give you money." She kept the relationship open, but she changed the boundaries. Years later, her son said that, painful as it was, those boundaries became one of the things God used to bring him to repentance.

The true story of Joseph from Genesis 50 is such a moving story and a powerful example of true and gracious forgiveness. Joseph's brothers did evil to him, they wanted him dead, they tried to kill, and what they did, selling him to slave traders, is no different from killing him. Fast forward to our story in Genesis 50, now Joseph is the second most powerful person in Egypt, even if he was a foreigner there, and was in charge of the

food storehouses, a very powerful position at a time where a deadly famine ravaged the world. His brothers came to him, begging for help. They were not sure how Joseph would treat them. If you were Joseph, how would you treat them? Joseph's words in verses 19-21 are so powerful and moving. He said to his brothers: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children."

As I said at the beginning, one of the things people appreciate about our church is that we are warm and welcoming. I thank God for that, and I pray that it will always be true of us. But my prayer is that we will grow even deeper than that. May we not simply be known as a friendly and welcoming church but as a gracious church - a church where people are quick to encourage, quick to forgive, slow to become bitter, humble enough to ask forgiveness when we have failed, and always ready to reflect the compassion of our Heavenly Father. For, after all, this is how God has treated us. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

May that astonishing grace shape our life together, strengthen our fellowship and make St Augustine's increasingly into what Christ calls his church to be - a true community of grace.

Amen.