

“Be Grateful that Grace Is Not Earned” based on Jonah 3:10-4:11 and Matthew 9:27- 10:16  
Delivered on September 20, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Have you ever wondered what it will be like to wake up in the new creation? Indeed, what would it be like to be raised from the grave to live again with God? I think for most of us, the first thing we think of when we wonder about it, is what it will be like to see loved ones again, all the friends and family, whom we have known and loved, but sorely miss right now.

On Friday, it was the fourth anniversary of my mother’s death. She was a woman of incredibly deep faith, who was also extremely intelligent. She was the one who introduced me to the works of Augustine of Hippo, Therese Lisieux, John of the Cross, Ignatius of Antioch, Clement and more. Her bible was well worn, stuffed with notes and highlighted. And I’ve never known anyone to be more committed to prayer.

As an elementary school student, my mom connected with her faith and it changed her. In her German immigrant home, her family was firmly Catholic but only as in, they were definitely not Lutheran. From what she described, my grandparents were not concerned about much more, at least not until their daughters brought a deep faith home from their Catholic School. By the time I was old enough to recognize something like faith, what I saw in my grandmother and mother was something real. It was not a cultural faith with a denominational identity, but resilient faith, rooted in relationship with Jesus, and practices that reflected commitment.

When I imagine what it will be like in the new creation, I want to find her first. I know that I can’t imagine heaven and earth joined together, reconciled fully, without Dorothy Mangione being there to worship and serve Jesus. I say this because I think that if what we believe in our faith is in fact true – That God’s Kingdom is here, and all things are being reconciled in Christ, to be a new heaven & earth for us to live in with God forever – then God’s justice dictates that my mom should be there, raised on the last day as a reward for her faith, and her faithfulness for all those many years.

But the truth is that my mom was human just like me and made many mistakes in her life. She was a sinner who struggled often in her sins and failures, just like her son (me) does now. My mom was very generous, but still worries over money often ruled her life. My mom was very devout in her faith and active in her defense of it, so much so, that she would hold grudges, unable to forgive opponents. She would lash out in anger at those whom she thought, did not deserve to call themselves Christians. I’m not sure she’d have liked my sermon last week, even if the Apostle Paul said it first. She likely would have only begrudgingly agreed.

When I look at these aspects of my mother’s life and, if I’m honest, when I look at these aspects of my own life, and I compare them with the teachings of Jesus, I know that I fall way short of meeting what Jesus said we must do to follow Him. You see, the gospel reading today started right after the story of the rich young man, who was the one who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells the young man to keep the commandments. The man says that he has kept them, and wonders what else? Jesus tells him, ‘Go and sell all you have and give it away, then come and follow me.’ He walks away dejected. None of us wants to lay down our life, be it our actual life, or the things we have, and which make up our identity.

Jesus says it is hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, implying this man will not enter. Hearing that this man had kept all the commandments, the disciples rightly wonder – ‘If this guy cannot get into the Kingdom of Heaven, who then can actually be saved?’ To which Jesus replies, for human beings it is impossible, meaning impossible to earn eternal life, but with God, all things are possible, meaning even the redemption of sinners.

That’s when we pick up today’s scripture and we find Peter focusing on the ‘do’ part of it. Peter seems to want to show that he is a worthy insider, who has done what was asked. The rich ruler was asked to sell everything and follow Jesus, and Peter has done this. Jesus tells Peter that the disciples will sit on thrones in the new creation, and says that whatever is given up by any disciple who follows Jesus, what they receive in the new creation will be far more valuable.

But this comes with a warning: Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. That’s when Jesus breaks out the parable that we read today to explain what He means.

Indeed, there are those who will be early adopters when it comes to following Jesus. Because of my mother, I was baptized into the faith and embraced it early on. Still, others I know who were baptized and even confirmed with me, they never really bought into the ‘come follow me’ part of church. Some of those individuals often mocked my fervor for my faith and claimed all the same rights and benefits in their life, simply because they went through all the motions. I was seen as a sucker for giving anything up, because I was missing out on the fun.

There are times when I feel like one of the workers who was hired at 9 a.m. and worked all day. I have been promised a wage and that wage is all that I have ever wanted, it is all I need, but when I see people who worked only half a day, or a quarter of a day, or one hour, and they have received the same wage, the same promised wage, it is easy to think that I have earned something more than they have. It is easy to think that I am right to expect that I’ll get more. If I compare myself to others, surely I’ve done more. So, if I’ve done more to earn my way with God, then surely, I will receive more.

I love the questions Jesus asks through the landowner at the end of this parable. ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

That last one in the Greek, what we translate as ‘are you envious’ could be literally translated, ‘you give me the evil eye.’ When I feel this way about my faith, like I have missed out on something by following Jesus, here is Jesus asking, *‘are you giving me the evil eye because I’m generous?’ Are you looking at me with skepticism, envy, because I gave you what I promised?’*

While it is hard to deal with this pay system when we compare ourselves to others, the landowner did not underpay anyone who worked the full day. The truth is that the only reason this seems unfair is because of the other workers. If the landowner had not hired anyone else, or paid them a pro-rated wage, or if the workers who worked the whole day had been paid first and left, then they would not have been upset or felt that they deserved more. In this scenario, the landowner is paying the workers fairly. They did the agreed upon work and they received the agreed upon wage for it.

But what if I am not one of the workers who arrived at 9 a.m. and worked the whole day. As I said regarding my mother, my life has also been filled with mistakes and sin. Maybe I have not been working for the landowner like I think I have. The rich ruler has done so much already to follow the commandments, yet, now Jesus is saying that was never enough to receive eternal life. The man walks away, apparently believing he cannot be saved. He thought that he had been working in the vineyard, but when Jesus came to him and invited him in, the young ruler did not come and follow.

What we see when the landowner gives the day's wage – all that is needed by those workers – it is no longer justice, as it was to pay the agreed upon wage to those who worked the whole day. No, now it is something more. It is mercy. It is something that is not deserved, but something that God gives anyway.

It is not possible to deserve the justice we want, but for that, we all depend on God's mercy. Remember, Jonah believed that he was righteous, that he was one of the chosen people of God, and that the Ninevites were not deserving of God's mercy, so he ran away from God. Indeed, Jonah sinned, turned his back on God, to avoid showing mercy to sinners. He is angry with God for not destroying the Ninevites, who are his enemy. But God reminds Jonah that God's mercy is not just for Jonah, and if God is merciful to Jonah, it can be taken away. God gave the shade plant to him and took it. Indeed, the lives of those Ninevites mattered too, and God chose to spare them that day, spare the consequences of their sin.

Friends, God's grace and forgiveness is not something we earn. Peter didn't earn it – remember even after this promise he and the disciples turn on Jesus, abandoning Him to the cross, with Peter even denying that he knew Jesus. Even while we were sinners, Jesus died on that cross for us out of love. That's the thing about grace: Because we cannot earn God's love and mercy, God loved us first by sharing in our humanity subject to all of its limits, and Jesus went to the Roman cross to die a death reserved for slaves and rebels. He was condemned because he was accused by the religious of blasphemy – saying he was God – and by the Romans for insurrection – saying he was King.

But death could not hold Jesus, and by the resurrection we see that sin and death have been defeated. We have been called to respond to this love, filled with the Holy Spirit of God, to work the fields for our Lord, until all is made new.

Friends, when I imagine the new creation, I know that it will not just be a hall of fame, showcasing only those who were the most perfect example of obedience to God, but a motley crew of sinners who started work at 9 a.m., noon, or 3 p.m., maybe a bunch who punched in at two minutes to sundown. But all of us who will be there, will be rejoicing in the presence of God our King, who did not have to save a single one of us for God's own sake, but shared in our humanity out of love for us, and died on that cross out of love for us, and rose again out of love for us.

Friends, I want you to hear the good news of our Lord Jesus and accept His invitation, let us work together in the fields, no matter if we work the full day, or if we are taken from this world after only a few minutes in the field, for it is by the grace and mercy of our Lord that we

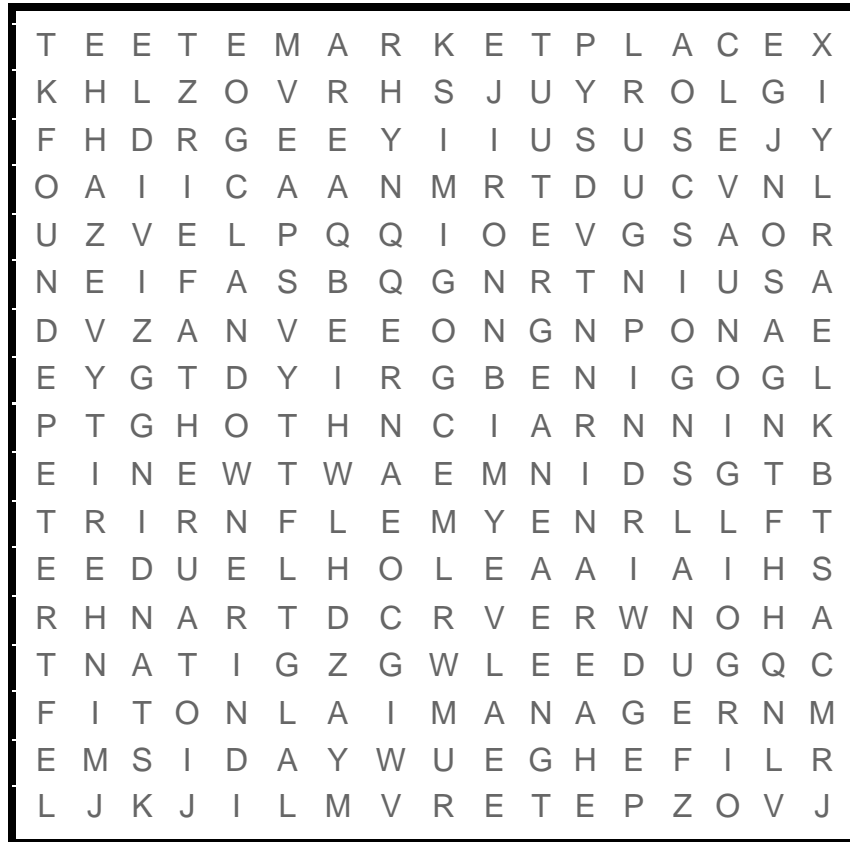
do so in one hope of being with our God in the new heaven and new earth.

Friends, we do nothing to earn God's grace and love, Jesus offers it to you freely. Let us not look down at our neighbors, but join our arms together, and enter into the vineyard with life abundant now, to be a part of God's work, and remember that if we are saved, none of us gets what we really deserve. Instead, we all get the love and mercy of our Lord, out of grace.

Let's remember that and be gracious toward one another. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words run left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

(Matthew 19:27-20:16 NRSV) Then **Peter** said to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" **Jesus** said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the **renewal** of all things, when the **Son of Man** is seated on the **throne** of his **glory**, you who have followed me will also **sit** on twelve thrones, **judging** the **twelve** tribes of **Israel**. And everyone who has **left** houses or brothers or sisters or **father** or mother or **children** or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will **inherit** eternal **life**. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. "For the **kingdom** of heaven is like a landowner who went out **early** in the **morning** to **hire** laborers for his vineyard. After **agreeing** with the laborers for the usual daily **wage**, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing **idle** in the **marketplace**; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will **pay** you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about **noon** and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and **found** others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you **standing** here idle all **day**?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When **evening** came, the owner of the **vineyard** said to his **manager**, '**Call** the laborers and give them their pay, **beginning** with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they **thought** they would **receive** more; but each of them also received the usual **daily** wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the **landowner**, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the **usual** daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to **give** to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last.