

From the Pulpit

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“Committing an Offense of Grace”

*Jonah 3:10-4:11, Philippians 1:21-30;
Matthew 20:1-16*

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A sermon delivered by Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 21, 2014, Pentecost 15, dedicated to our newest members, Laura Baird, Phillip Atkins, Al and Barbara Glover, Pat Groseck, and Heather Whaling and their families, to Bryan and Aubrie Hasselbusch as they begin their life together as husband and wife, to Hank and Melinda Gleissner during Hank's recovery, to Amos and Janice White for their courage in facing life's great challenges and to David Shaver as battles cancer and always to the glory of God!

“Committing an Offense of Grace”

Jonah 3:10-4:11, Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Jesus tells the parable of the Generous Employer from the stuff of common life. It is harvest time. The grapes are ready for picking. When grapes are at their prime, a vineyard owner needs extra workers to harvest them quickly. So the owner goes to the village marketplace and hires day-workers for the harvest. They agree to work for a fair day's wages (or a denarius) from sunrise to sunset.

Concerned that the harvest might not be completed, the owner gets more workers at the morning coffee break, lunchtime, the afternoon coffee break and even one hour before quitting time. The owner offers to pay what is fair, presumably an appropriate portion of one denarius. There is no hint in this story that any of the later workers deliberately delay their availability so to presume upon the owner's goodness. In fact, Matthew 20:7 tells us that the workers who began at 5pm said they were unemployed because no one had offered them a job.

So far, all is normal. Nothing is unfair about the conditions or the offer of pay for labor done. Everyone seems content until the payroll at quitting time, when the exhausted stalwarts who had labored 12 hours broiling in the sun learn stumble to the vineyard owner for their wages only to discover that the sweat-less one hour workers are receiving the same pay. Through parched lips, they grumble angrily, "This is not fair!"

"This is not fair!" - Anyone who has been a parent or a child has heard or spoken these words. If you were raised with siblings, this could have been your battle cry across years of reaction to mom and dad. You might have been right....You might have even been justified.

The 12 hour workers' grumbling seems justifiable. This appears to be something like atrocious economics. But, the owner's reply is clear. He says, "*Are you envious because I am generous?*" The literal translation is: "*Has your eye become evil because I am good?*" No one has been denied. No one cheated. No one has been given less than what was agreed upon.

The lack of economic sense in Jesus' story is his intent.

Jesus wants to show that the only offense lies in the Employer's generosity. **He commits an offense of grace.** The offense of grace is never in the **treatment** we receive from those who offer us unconditional generosity. Grace becomes offensive when we **observe** that others are getting more than we believe they deserve.

It's the way of God's Grace. God's Amazing Grace undoes good people. It shakes the foundations of those who live orderly lives. God's grace offends those who follow the rules, measure life carefully and calculate outcomes perfectly.

In Nineveh, Jonah is angry that God accepts the repentance of the people of Nineveh - even though that is exactly what he was sent on God's mission to demand of the

Ninevites! He is so mad at God that when the people of Nineveh repent and turn to God, Jonah goes out of the city and pouts. He thought he was in a Divine Video Game in which God was going to blow up the city in 3-D. God challenges him, *“You are angry when I destroy a shade tree. But, you don’t care about the 120,000 and their animals who didn’t know right from wrong whom I saved? Jonah, you are messed up.”*

Jonah cannot see and cannot accept that there is a wideness of God’s mercy!

There are other examples of God being a God of Grace and not just a Gory God. Matthew 5:45 tells us that God sends the rain and sun on the just and the unjust, on the good and the bad. That offends some of us. Luke 6:35 tells us that God is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. That galls a good deal of us! The kindness and generosity of God often cut through our calculations of who deserves what.

One 17th Century man who struggled to comprehend the mind of God and God's offense of grace was Antonio Salieri. Salieri was a fine musician and a devout man of God who sought to understand God's ways and serve God all his days. He had the desire, but not the aptitude, to create immortal music of praise. Salieri grew increasingly angry at

God for lavishing the greatest gifts of musical genius on an impish preadolescent named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

In the film *Amadeus* (which is Latin for "beloved of God"), Salieri ponders aloud why God would reward an undeserving brat like Mozart. Salieri's pain meets its match in the scandal of grace. One line from the play expresses the intersection of the pain and the scandal: "*What use, after all, is man if not to teach God his lessons?*" **Salieri is one man who doesn't "get" God's grace.** (Phillip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, pp. 60-61).

Do you "get" God's grace?

Each of us receives God's grace in our daily lives – whether we acknowledge this or see this. But, I am asking “do you ever desire to teach God his lessons?” For all our talk of grace, how many times has "un-grace" marked our words and actions? I hear and see it all the time. I am embarrassed to confess that I sometimes join the refrain. We sound like the 12 hour workers.

We say things like: "*They' don't come often enough. They' don't work hard enough. They' don't give enough in proportion to their ability to give. They' don't offer their time and talent - and they have a lot of both!*" They... they...

they...you... you... you... - two words when used wrong usually point to “un-grace.”

We might do it when complaining about how we are being served. Once I had the experience that a waitress wasn't serving me fast enough, well enough, and joyfully enough. Frankly, I didn't feel like she was paying enough attention to me. So, I gracelessly complained to the manager as I was checking out. He said, *“Her mother just died of cancer. She buried her yesterday. This is her first day back at work. Frankly, it is amazing that she came to work today. Maybe you should pray for her and not judge her today. In fact, you might want to give her a better tip for serving you.”*

I sounded like Salieri! I was trying to teach God his lessons for the day.

Often, newness, bad behavior, long time absence, or a whole host of offenses are rolled out in our words and deeds of un-grace as rationale for cutting off folks in church, at work, in schools, and in our neighborhoods. But, you and I and guided by the new math of Gods' grace. We have our Great God and God's atrocious economics to guide our way. Scripture tells us in the parable of the Generous Employer that people are drawn in by kindness and grace. It's true! Every person I know responds to Love not

Judgment. They respond kindness not unkindness. They respond to Grace, not Un-grace.

God doesn't differentiate between the 12 hour worker and the one hour worker. God is generous and wishes only to share God's abundance, wealth, joy, and happiness. God's goodness and generosity should inspire us to be good; to be generous, to be faithful givers to others. We need to open our eyes to the power and promise of God's grace!

Frederick Buechner puts it this way in Telling the Truth, a story which begins with his father's suicide – a death which affects everyone in his family for a generation or two:

People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's. They are prepared for a mustard seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck

supper at First Church but not for the marriage feast in the kingdom of heaven! ...(F. Buechner, Telling the Truth, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 70).

Too often we would rather cry out, "It's not fair" then shout out, "What an amazing God we praise and worship!" How may I serve such a glorious God?

When we live in the Amazing Grace of God's atrocious economics, we end up better for having done so. God delivers on God's promise of grace!

Today I want you to count your blessings for being baptized in the body of Christ! Are you aware of what a life-sustaining blessing that is? God has given you a multitude of gifts and graces. You possess these and your job is to share them with others. Just a few weeks ago, you did this through Good Samaritan Fund offerings – opening yourselves up and sharing over \$2700 to mercifully care for those whom God has brought to us. I see us living into grace many times when give instead of take, uplift instead of complain, change instead of maintain the status quo.

We need to remember that Grace is often born with tremendous labor pain. And, Divine grace never rests on a merit system. As a result, those of us who are insiders, who show up before dawn and end the day after sunset, are

prone to grumble. We may second-guess God who practices atrocious economics. God's way is not like our way. Our way is to share a little bit of our hard-earned cash. God gives it all! Our way is to share a little bit of our hearts and minds with those who need love and intellectual stimulation. God gives it all!

In the atrocious economics of God, in the new math of God's Kingdom, thanks be to God who is our Generous Employer of Grace. Even when and if we don't "get" it, it doesn't mean God doesn't "give" it. As we go forth today, may we act like Jesus (not Salieri). And may Jesus' words in this passage be that last we hear and the first we employ through the labor pain of Grace: *"The last will be first, and the first will be last."*

Be present. Be graceful. Be the graceful presence of God in the world. When all is said and done, when the sun sets on our days of labor, maybe we will figure out and learn to live into the "new math of God." Amen.

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