

Five Candy Pumpkins: Grace for All

Matthew 20:1-16

11-12-2017

Last Sunday afternoon, our Junior Deacons hosted a great little event for our Church School kids —

Service Sunday, they called it.

They set up four stations over in the Church House,

four different service projects,

and the kids who came rotated around:

putting together breakfast bags for the residents at operation Hope,

writing Christmas cards to soldiers overseas,

making friendship bracelets for kids in India —

and decorating cupcakes for the dinner that our high schoolers, SPF, would serve the next day in Bridgeport.

The cupcake station was a little messy —

120 cupcakes, 10 cans of frosting, and a whole lot of excited little kids.

But it worked!

What we discovered is that they decorated those cupcakes

exactly the way that they wished people would decorate cupcakes for them.

Do unto your cupcake as you would have others do unto yours.

In other words: two solid inches of frosting.

And I had bought up bags of half-price candy corn and those little candy pumpkins —

so each cupcake was absolutely studded with candy, sort of porcupine-esque.

And on Monday, those cupcakes proved to be the most popular dessert we've ever served at our Bridgeport community supper.

Towards the end of the supper hour on Monday, as our SPF kids were starting to clean up,

two kids and their moms arrived, running late.

We still had food left, thank goodness, and — phew — we even had a few cupcakes left for the kids.

The first kid through the line, a little girl, sized up the cupcake options remaining, and with great delight and an air of triumph, she seized the one that had no less than five candy pumpkins piled on top of it. The little boy behind her took what was next best: a cupcake with **two** candy pumpkins on it.

He didn't say a word, but I could see him gazing wistfully at the candy-laden cupcake of his friend.

As they settled themselves down at the table, I thought to myself: "I can fix this."

I stripped the remaining cupcakes of their candy, hurried over to their table, and, very pleased with myself, dramatically stuck three more candy pumpkins on the little boy's cupcake. They were now, officially, **even**.

And here's what happened.

The little boy grinned with delight.

But the little girl shrieked, I mean *shrieked*, with dismay.

"That's not fair!" she wailed.

Her victory in the cupcake battle had been taken away by my unexpected gift of candy.

Her mother told her to shush and eat her chicken.

And I wandered away, thinking "there's a parable about that."

There **is** a parable about that.

It's the parable Jason just read to you from Matthew's Gospel, a story that Jesus told a bunch of people one day.

"The Kingdom of God is like this," Jesus said to them.

It's like a landowner who went out real early in the morning looking for people to work his vineyard.

And there were some people out there ready to go, and he hired them, and promised them a good day's wage.

Later on, around 9 a.m., he went back out,

found some other folks ready to work, and hired them, too.
He did it again at noon,
and again at 3, and near the end of the day, round about 5 o'clock.

At the end of the work day,
the landowner goes up to the folks hired last, the ones who worked just an hour
or so,
and he gives them — *surprise* — a full day's wages, a good day's pay!
And he goes to the ones who got there early in the morning,
and they're figuring, whoa, if those latecomers got a good day's pay,
we're looking at some kind of jackpot for all of us who got here early.
But what does the owner give them? Same thing.
A good, fair, day's wages.
First in line gets treated just the same as the last in line.
Just as generously, and just the same.
Five candy pumpkins on everyone's cupcake.

And their reaction? Absolutely the same as the indignant little girl at our supper.
That is NOT fair!!!

And no doubt everyone listening to Jesus tell the story felt the same way.
That is NOT fair!

Ah, says Jesus, but ...
doesn't the owner of the vineyard have the right to be generous to everyone
if generous is what he chooses to be?
The first gets the same as the last ...
the last is as good as the first.
Five candy pumpkins on EVERYONE'S cupcake,
no matter where you happened to be in the line.

Jesus' stories always had a point.
So why'd he tell this story?

Because people were starting to wonder why Jesus wasn't just a little more selective about who he kept company with,
a little more choosy about whom he healed,
a little more particular about whom he ate dinner with,
a little more sensible about whom he chose to welcome
and to love.

It seemed to them that there ought to be some priority shown —
to the well-educated, for instance, to the well-read,
or at least to the well-behaved.

So Jesus tells this story, this parable,
where whether you're first in line or last in line
you get treated just as well.
Five candy pumpkins for everyone.
Doesn't the owner, says Jesus,
doesn't the Creator,
have the right to be generous to whomever he pleases?
Each has received in full.

Every last one of you, Jesus was saying,
receives a full measure of God's love, **my** love.
Every last one of you,
well-educated scribe or suffering leper,
knowledgeable Pharisee or shy and shunned woman.
Every last one of you,
first to arrive or last on the scene
receives God's full-fledged, all-out embrace of love and mercy.
Doesn't the Creator
have the right to be generous to whomever he pleases?
Each one receives in full. No one is less worthy.

That's not the easiest concept for us to wrap our minds around.
We are pretty well-conditioned to think that what we have is what we've earned,

that what people receive is what people deserve.
“There’s no such thing as a free lunch,” we say,
“you get what you give.”

In my early years of preaching here,
fresh out of seminary, I was really into cute gimmicks in my sermons.
I would bring props up here in the pulpit,
hide things in the pews for people to find.
Now that I say it out loud, it was kind of fun — maybe I’ll do it again.
But anyway.

One Sunday, just to prove the point of this parable, this is what I did:
I began my sermon with a pop quiz.
Seriously.

I had everyone grab one of those pew pencils,
turn their bulletins over, and write down the answers to five Bible questions.
And — I told them — there would be prizes given.

These were the five questions:

How many of the books of the Bible are there?

What was Paul’s name before it was Paul?

Who was accused of being a “glutton and drunkard”?

How many folks did Jesus feed with five loaves and two fish?

And lastly, who succeeded King Asa as King of Israel?

Let me tell you, it got pretty intense out there in the pews.

Furrowed brows, whispered pleas for help with the answers,
and more than a few people glaring at me like,

“seriously? I come to church for an hour of peace, and you give me a quiz?”

Finally, I gave them the answers —

66, Saul, Jesus, five thousand, and Jehosophat.

And then I announced the prizes.

If you got all five right, you got five Hershey’s kisses at the front door.

And if you got three right, you got — five Hershey’s kisses at the front door.

None right? you guessed it — five Hershey's kisses for you.
There were a good many chuckles of delight.
There were also — truth be told — some mumblings of dismay
from those who'd done particularly well.

That's the grace of God, I told them.
It actually doesn't matter what you know or don't know.
It doesn't matter who you are or aren't,
or where you are on the journey of faith.
Chocolate for all.
Five pumpkins on each cupcake.

That's what Jesus' story was all about.
That's why this one story, this one strange little story about a vineyard
and its workers,
actually tells us everything we need to know,
about who we are,
about how loved we are,
about the astonishing, ridiculous, illogical, unfathomable
depth of grace that God gives to each and every one of us.

Grace, free and unearned, is a hard thing to wrap our minds around.
Even after my sermon that day,
I can't tell you how many people at the front door that Sunday confessed to me
that they really didn't deserve **any** Hershey's kisses.
There were also a few who really thought they should have more than five.

It can be hard to accept that we're loved this much —
it can also be hard to accept that everyone else — **everyone** else — is also loved
that much.

Some years back, we had a speaker here at church, Rev. Walter Everett,
who shared the extraordinary story of his journey to forgiveness.

His son had died at the hands of another man,
and Walter had found his way to forgiveness,
even to the point of befriending the murderer,
even officiating at his wedding.

Conscious of the depth of God's grace toward him,
Walter Everett found he could not withhold that grace from another.
But for every person who said "oh, how beautiful,"
there were others, especially those who'd known his son,
who found his forgiveness abhorrent.
That man doesn't deserve it, they said.
That's not fair, they said.

But Walter Everett was only living out the faith of Jesus Christ.
And in this faith,
God's grace is poured out over all of us in abundant measure.
There is no first in line in this faith, no last.

And here in this church, the same is true.
Doesn't matter what you've been,
what you are,
what you've done or not done,
what secrets you carry.
Doesn't matter how you got here,
or when you got here —
doesn't matter if you grew up
never missing church, never missing mass,
or never setting foot in any place of worship ever.
Doesn't matter why you're here —
for yourself, for the kids,
to **be** helped, or to help.

Each and every one of us receives the full measure of God's love,
the full embrace of God's mercy.

Doesn't the Creator have the right to be generous to whomever he pleases?
said Jesus.

Doesn't the Creator have the right to be generous to all?

Each receives in full.

No one has earned it.

And no one deserves it more.

So what do we do with this gift,

this gift of abundant love poured out on each of us?

First, most simply, we recognize it as grace:

not earned, not merited, just the grace of being loved as we are.

We recognize it, we accept it.

And then we live into it —

with the grace we have been given, we live with grace toward others.

Do you remember — did you see — the movie that came out

two decades ago now, 'Saving Private Ryan'?

In the midst of World War II, Tom Hanks' character, Captain Miller,

is charged with leading a band of soldiers across the fields of France

through the worst of the fighting

to find and rescue Private James Ryan.

And at the end,

Captain Miller lies dying,

one of many lives given so that Ryan's life would be spared.

Do you remember what he whispers to James Ryan?

"Earn this," he says, "earn this."

And the scene fades away

and then we fade back in, decades later,

to see an old, gray James Ryan standing at the grave of Captain Miller.

"Every day," he says, "every day I've tried to live the best I could.

I hope that was enough."

Every day, God holds out to us priceless love,
every day, Jesus holds out to us a life given for us,
freely given,
love abundant,
unmerited, unearned,
given to each one of us.

Each one of us, no matter who, no matter what,
is loved by an amazing grace.
No one of us has earned it—
and in truth, no one of us CAN earn it.
But each one of us has received it, and each one of us can live it.
And there's nothing wrong with being like James Ryan:
trying to live the best we can.
Each day remembering, each day remembering
that we are loved beyond measure —
whether we were first to arrive or the last to show up —
each day remembering that we are forgiven beyond all deserving
cherished beyond all imagining
by a good and generous God.

And in this place, as a family of faith,
we demonstrate that grace by our generosity of grace.
Loving beyond measure, and marking no difference.
Each of welcomed, and each of us welcoming.
Each of us forgiven, and each of us forgiving.
Every day remembering, and every day giving grace,
amazing grace.
Amen.

And by the way? – I've got Hershey's kisses at the front door for everyone.