

PRACTICE GRACE
Randall Tremba
September 21, 2014
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Exodus 16:1-15

The Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. *If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the stewpots and ate our fill of bread; but you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill us all with hunger.*

Then the LORD said to Moses, *I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.* When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, *What is it?* For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, *It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.* [And that “manna,” as it turns out, was enough to give them strength for their journey.]

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, *the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*

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One hundred fifty two years ago this week scores of wounded young men lay on the floor boards under your feet. This carpet now covers those blood stained boards.

Those young men were the sons of this nation, bloodied in battle against their brothers on the fields along the Antietam Creek outside Sharpsburg. Many took their last breath in this room. And many died with pleas for mercy upon their lips and prayers for peace in their heart.

Forever after, this would be holy ground. Forever after, this Meetinghouse would be a house of prayer, prayers for peace, prayers for peace for all peoples and nations.

O Lord, let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

You've heard it said: for everything there is a season—a time to laugh and a time to weep; a time to love and a time to hate; a time for peace and a time for war.

The yellow ribbons hanging on the fence around this church today remind us of a time for war, a civil war that brought forth death and destruction upon our beloved nation. Those yellow ribbons remind us that this month is “a season of peace” for us. And may it always be the season of our hearts.

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

Over the course of several months the members of this church and the citizens of this town did what they could to relieve the suffering of those wounded men. Those citizens were thirsty, hungry and tired themselves, but still they brought the little they had—water, bread and in one case green bean stew. Maybe they

couldn't stop the dying, or stop the war, or make peace break out, but they could practice grace and generosity, one person at a time.

And that's the grace of the world. And that's holy work. And that's what love calls us to do all day long: *practice grace*.

The work of peace, like the work of harvesting grapes, can't stop until the harvest of peace is in hand. And so the Lord of the harvest keeps calling more and more workers to work for peace.

Jesus said, *the kingdom of heaven*—which is to say, the reign of love—is like an owner of a vineyard who kept recruiting workers every hour of the day to make sure the grapes didn't rot on the vine. In other words, the opportunity was now and it was urgent.

At the end of the day, said Jesus, the owner gave each worker — those who worked all day and those who worked but an hour — the lord of the harvest gave everyone a full day's pay. Why? Because the kingdom of heaven isn't about what you deserve, it's about what you need.

It's a parable. It's not instructions on how to run a business or a national economy. Although I suppose it could be. Imagine that—everyone earning a living wage. This is a parable about the grace of the world.

Grace is not about earning and deserving. We don't always get what we want or what we think we deserve. But more often than not, we get what we need, like manna from heaven, enough for today. After all, who can honestly say I deserve this and you don't. Love isn't like that. Love gives what is needed.

Maybe we can't reform the criminal justice system in this country. Maybe we can't set all unjustly imprisoned prisoners free. But we can practice grace for a few inmates at MCI just over the river and up highway 65. We can give what they need. We can practice grace and generosity.

Maybe we can't fix the economic inequality gap in this country or create equal opportunity for all, but we can share a meal with migrant workers and offer a few shirts, jackets, and shoes. We can practice grace.

Maybe we can't cure cancer or stop it from destroying life, but we can make life more bearable for those who suffer by keeping in touch as they walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We can practice grace.

Maybe we can't stop the destruction of the earth and atmosphere, but we can put up solar panels. We can turn our thermostats down. We can drive less and walk more. We can buy less and reuse more. We can practice grace for the earth.

Maybe we can't change the ugly polarization dividing our nation, but we can listen more deeply to those with whom we disagree. We can give our adversaries the benefit of the doubt. We can be quick to say I'm sorry; and be ready at all times to forgive. We can practice grace.

Maybe these things seem small compared to the problems of the world. But the grace of the world isn't about size. It's about simple things. It's about lying down by the water where the wood drake rests and the great heron feeds. It's about breathing in the grace of the world and letting it fill us with faith, hope and love.

Yes, we can grumble and complain because life is unfair, or because others have more than we have, or because yesterday was better than today. Or we can take what we have, live simply, love generously, speak kindly, and trust the Creator to love us and to be with us all the way on that long and winding road.

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HYMN
When a Poor One