

Messy Grace: Engagement

Matthew 5:38-42, 10:16; Luke 10:25-37; John 13:34-35

We are called to *Love God* and *Love Others*. I think for most of us, the loving others part is the hardest. Engaging with others is often complicated, frustrating, and messy.

Last week, we kicked off this series by talking about what grace is. We learned that putting grace into action requires both **willingness and wisdom**. What stood out to me the most was the story of Paul and Silas in prison. I had never thought about the story that way before. They did not choose the prison, but God used the prison to position them for grace.

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations we would never choose but that is often where we encounter people that we would never have connections with otherwise...workplace, neighborhood, waiting rooms, the interruptions... All of it can become an opportunity for grace. You may not choose the *place*, but you can choose your *posture* and *perspective*.

The Good Samaritan:

Read Luke 10:25-37. Jesus tells this story after a Pharisee asks, "Who is my neighbor?" That question, which was meant to entrap Jesus, was important. Just like now, people then tended to define their neighbors as people who are similar and familiar to them.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a steep, dangerous road, descending through rocky desert terrain. It was known for bandits and ambushes. So when Jesus says a man was robbed and left half dead, listeners knew that it was believable. That road had a reputation.

Then Jesus introduced three travelers. First, a priest who saw the wounded man passed by. This was someone who would have served in worship duties in Jerusalem. Priests were respected religious leaders.

Second, a Levite who also saw the wounded man also passed by. Levites assisted with temple functions and were also respected because of their religious service.

Then a Samaritan came by. This is the shocking part of the story. Hostility had existed between the Samaritans and Jews for centuries. There was ethnic tension, religious disagreement, and mutual suspicion. Many Jews viewed Samaritans as outsiders or compromised people. In everyday culture, a Samaritan would not be the hero in a Jewish story. Yet, Jesus makes the Samaritan the model neighbor. He crossed barriers (race, religion, culture, and convenience). He stopped. He cared. He paid and expected nothing in return.

Messy Engagement:

Grace moves us toward people that others avoid. Grace notices what others ignore. Jesus intentionally made the outsider the example in His parable because grace crosses every boundary we build.

Reread Luke 10:33. The Greek word for "pity" or "compassion" in Luke 10:33 is *splagchnizomai* (*SPLAG-NEE-SO-MY*). It refers to a deep, gut-level, visceral emotion, often translated as being "moved with compassion". The term originates from *splagchnon* (the inward parts or bowels), denoting empathy felt in one's "gut," prompting direct action to help. It's empathy that is felt so deeply that it is felt physically.

As I was writing this, I thought that it would be a good time to let you guys know about some changes that are coming and what it means. 100 Families has been funded since the beginning by TANF, which is a Federal grant that comes with stipulations on who we can enroll. Recently, the faith division of the governor's office has launched a new initiative that will eventually become our new funding source. The new initiative is called 10:33...as in Luke

10:33. Soon, we will be able to serve any individual who needs help (elderly, young adults, people who don't have kids or have lost rights to their kids...those whose stories cause a gut wrenching reaction.

Also, Smart Justice has been expanded to become Smart Justice Services. We will no longer serve those only in District Court, but will now be able to serve any justice involved individual (Aka - the outsiders, the forgotten, the ones we often look past or judge to be irredeemable).

And while these changes are good things, the work is not going to be easy. But Grace is often walking the extra mile especially for those who are hardest to love.

The Extra Mile:

Read Matthew 5:38-42. Jesus spoke these words while the Jewish people were living under Roman occupation. Roman soldiers had legal authority to compel civilians to carry burdens or equipment for one mile. This was part of imperial power. It was a reminder to the Jewish people that they were not free.

Imagine being stopped on the road by an armed soldier and forced to carry his pack. It was humiliating. It was inconvenient. It was resented. The first mile was not kindness; it was forced submission. That is what makes Jesus' words so radical. He is asking us to not only do what is forced, but to choose to go farther. (This clip from the Chosen gives a good visual of what this would have looked like. This is not an account directly from the Bible, but an imagining of the concept. <https://youtu.be/vnpcrpfvKR8?si=HxGRCBjFSoP9P1rg>)

The second mile was *voluntary*. The soldier expected resistance. He did not expect grace. This teaching comes from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus repeatedly calls His followers to show radical love. Kingdom character is not about revenge or retaliation. It is about unexpected grace...turn the other cheek, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.

The second mile is *not weakness*. It is strength. Grace can transform forced moments into chosen witness. The first mile is what power can demand but the second mile is what only love can choose.

Willing AND Wise:

But, as we learned last week, Grace needs wisdom. It is far too easy to take this teaching and think that it means that Jesus is telling us to be doormats for others. That we give without end and serve without boundaries. In Matthew 10:16 it says, "*I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves.*" Jesus is not telling us to offer our lives to the appetites and abuse of others. We should be willing AND wise.

Being kind doesn't mean being ignorant. Grace does NOT mean: enabling destructive behavior, ignoring danger, allowing manipulation, saying yes to every request, or putting yourself or others at risk. Sometimes the wisest form of grace is a loving 'no'.

I think that the hardest learning curve for anyone starting to work in social work or ministry is learning how to discern between real needs and manipulation. We have had to learn a lot of these lessons the hard way and it is even harder when you are not exposed to people in desperate situations regularly.

There is nothing wrong with having a soft heart, but it is also important to work together and seek council in these situations.

CarePortal:

Another exciting thing coming up is the launch of CarePortal. This is a new resource in our area that is through a partnership with the Arkansas Family Alliance. When our team or DCFS is working with someone who has a legitimate need, we can put it out on CarePortal and any church in the community who has signed up to be a part of it will receive a notification. If they are able to meet the need, they can accept it and have the opportunity to personally deliver the item to the family.

This opens so many doors! It is difficult for churches to be able to connect with people in the community to know what needs are, but this allows people to see the Body of Christ working together to show God's love in tangible ways.

Examples of Messy Engagement:

I struggled when writing this message because I could sit here and give you examples all day of the messy grace I have seen and experienced.

- My friend who has continued grocery shopping and spending time with a lady who she met while delivering groceries during COVID.
- My employee who makes sure to call a participant on a Sunday because she knows it is her birthday and she wants to make sure that she knows someone cares enough to remember.
- The man who walked in the house barefoot on a cold rainy night after a quick trip to Walmart because he saw a homeless man walking on the side of the road in the freezing cold wearing flip flops.
- The college student who didn't have much to give but gave without hesitation to a woman asking for help in a coffee shop.
- A kid who, when finding out that another kid hadn't gotten a golden easter egg, ran to her to share one of his.
- Another friend who hates her job because it is so painful for her to hear children talk day after day about the abuse they have experienced but she would never do anything different because she wants to be the person for them that she needed when she was a kid.

I could go on and on, but I won't... much more. I have just one more story to share. A friend of mine had been looking for a job for a long time and felt frustrated, wondering if she was fulfilling her calling. I had lunch with her a month or so ago and she was struggling to stay awake because she had been up too late the night before. I asked why and she started telling me about her neighbors.

A few weeks before was when we had the big snow storm. After being snowed in for a day, she began to think about her neighbors that she didn't really know but knew they were college students and may not have been prepared for the weather. She decided to invite them over for dinner that night. She knew that they did not believe in God, but she opened the door anyway. A relationship began.

Then, the night before our lunch, she got a late night phone call. They had been experimenting with tarot cards and had freaked themselves out. She knew she had to get up early to get to work the next day, but she invited them over anyway and talked with them until they felt better.

Trust began to grow. They began calling her their 'Christian friend' and told her they appreciated that she didn't preach at them. She just treated them normally.

At Easter she made them baskets with stickers, energy drinks, and little Jesus figures that she had accidentally bought in bulk. She wrote them a simple note: “I know you don’t celebrate Easter, but I do, and I wanted to celebrate by letting you know I care about you.”

Weeks later she was waiting for a job interview and saw a little Jesus figure sitting in a plant nearby. After the interview, a woman asked if she knew a college student who lives in the same apartment complex as her. It was the girl’s mother. She said, “I’ve been praying God would send someone to show my daughter what Christian love looks like. Sometimes it has to come from a stranger.”

That night the neighbor admitted she had placed the Jesus figure, from her Easter basket, in that plant at her Mom’s job. She then said, “This can’t just be random. If I believed, I would have to think it was a God thing.”

My friend got the job. She may have still gotten the job interview either way, but if she had never opened the door, her neighbors may never have experienced the love of Jesus.

Sometimes while you are waiting for God to open one door, He is asking you to open yours. Who is near you right now who needs grace? Who needs wisdom-guided compassion? Who is watching your life?

Read John 13:34-35. Messy Grace isn’t about earning your salvation or gaining bricks for a bigger mansion in heaven. It’s about showing the selfless love of Jesus to the world. The Gospel - Good News of Jesus - is best shared through actions, not words. They may not know your doctrine. They may not ever go to your church. But they will know Jesus’ grace by your love.

We are One in the Spirit “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love...”

Reflection Questions:

- Why do you think the priest and Levite passed by?
 - Which of their possible reasons do you relate to most?
 - Are there people you tend to ignore because helping them feels complicated or messy?
- When have you felt that deep, gut-level compassion (splagchnizomai)? What did you do with it?
- What does the “first mile” look like in your daily life (things you *have* to do)?
 - What might a “second mile” look like in one of those situations?
 - Why do you think going the second mile is described as strength rather than weakness?
- What are some signs that wisdom—not just willingness—is needed in a situation?
- If people judged your faith only by your actions, what would they conclude?
 - Who is currently “watching your life,” whether you realize it or not?
 - What does it practically look like for you to love others the way Jesus commands?
- What does the following quote mean to you? “*Service is what prayers looks like when it gets off its knees and walks around the world.*” Michael Graham