

“Grace Wins”
September 14, 2025
Scripture: Exodus 32:7-14; Luke 15:1-10

Many of us were raised to believe that God is unchangeable or “immutable” as it’s called theologically. We’ve understood that to mean that God is fixed and predictable. And we’re a little uncomfortable with an image of God that is more ambiguous. We like absolutes. We like a world where things unfold in ways we can expect, and we want God to fit that model. Think of gravity, for instance. If I let go of this pencil every one of us can predict what will happen. We might not know exactly where it will land, but we know it will land. It won’t float in mid-air. It won’t fly across the room. Every time I let it go it will fall to the ground; there is no statistical probability that it won’t do that. That’s the kind of absolute certainty we want from God.

But God isn’t like gravity. As Moses discovers in his conversation with God, there’s room for negotiation. So, the people in the encampment became restless while Moses was off meeting with God on Mt. Sinai. It made Aaron, Moses’ brother and leader in his absence, sort of nervous. He decided to take action and created an object, an idol, for them to focus on. The golden calf was probably something from the Egyptian line of gods and goddesses, so the Israelites were familiar with it. It was an attempt to give them a concrete image that was certain and absolute.

But the real God is different. In a moment of anger, God decides to wipe them all out. Moses, though, is able to intervene. He’s able to calm God’s fury and bring God back to reason. I think what’s happening here is Moses puts his faith in a quality he’s seen in God and knows is stronger than God’s wrath. He relies on God’s capacity for grace. And grace wins. Grace is so overwhelming that it compels God to change.

When you think about it, that’s a pretty amazing insight. Why would the God of all creation, the universe and everything in it, submit to grace? I think grace gets a bad rap in our culture, at least these days it seems to. We prefer retribution. We want to see people get what’s coming to them. And certainly the Israelites were blowing it in Moses’ absence. Yet Moses encourages God to be graceful with them. He calls on God to show the world a different way to rule, the way of mercy and loving kindness.

And what this collection of ragtag people becomes, in their life under God’s rule, is an example of what a grace-filled community can look like. They never become very powerful; they aren’t conquerors or colonizers, yet their influence is preserved and passed down generation to generation. They lay the foundation for a society built on justice and compassion rather than cruelty and retribution. And the scriptures they leave behind recount what a struggle it is to live with grace and how easy it is to get it wrong.

The teachings of Jesus expand on that project. When religious leaders complain to him about the company he keeps, he invites them to find grace within themselves that can change their perspective. He doesn’t belittle them or berate them, he just offers a few stories, we heard two of them, but a third even more famous one is being teed up. They’re all about losing and finding: a shepherd loses a sheep, a woman loses a coin, a father loses a son (which one is the real question). In each of them some effort is made to find what’s been lost, to not simply allow

it to drift away. In Luke's thinking, these religious pillars are too willing to allow those who have wandered to remain lost. They don't have the grace to go after them.

Jesus encourages them to let grace win in their lives. He invites them to seek the lost without casting blame or accusing. And to rejoice in finding them no matter what their condition because the real value is in becoming whole again. Grace allows us to see how we're diminished without the one who is missing. If you had a hundred sheep and one wandered off, would you even notice? When those who are lost can be found and brought back into community, we all win. That's the message I think Jesus is teaching his detractors.

Only grace makes that possible. In a society where there is immense division and hostility, where we spend so much time staking out our territory and planting ourselves in one camp or another, finding the grace to acknowledge our need for one another is a huge challenge. We've seen once again this past week how all-consuming our online lives can become and how easy it is to demonize one another through social media. I'm certainly guilty of it. I spend way too much time scrolling through messages that feed my personal bias. After awhile it seems to function for us the way the golden calf did for the Israelites. It becomes a way to distract us from real encounters, from seeing each other fully so we can live with compassion toward each other and not resentment.

When Moses calls on God to think again about destroying the people, he basically says, "If you do that, what does that make you?" What do we become when we live without grace? We become embittered and vengeful. When we live without grace we see nothing but threats around us and we spend all our time constructing walls between ourselves and those we feel are unworthy. It is a lonely, sad, fragmented existence. When we cut ourselves off from those who are lost, we lose a part of ourselves as well. Helping these religious leaders understand that is what Jesus' words are all about.

It's what we continue to struggle to understand. Opening ourselves up to grace and letting it guide our thinking and acting is the path to wholeness. That doesn't mean we simply accept the world as it is. Grace doesn't require us to be passive. In fact, as Jesus practices it, grace sees the world as flawed and offers an alternative. When Martin Luther King was leading the civil rights movement he was very careful to make clear that Black empowerment and justice wasn't meant to punish white people, it was to rescue them. The world he saw, where mistreatment and division was everywhere, was a world of pain and suffering for everyone. Just as the black population was diminished materially by being denied access to social and political power, the white population was diminished spiritually and morally. Only a world where grace wins could heal the divisions among them and make them whole.

That's the lesson God learns from Moses on Sinai that convinces God to change God's mind and not destroy the people. And I think it's what we must learn about the world we live in. We cannot go on divided against one another. It's time to look around and see who's missing and seek them out. It's time to let grace win so the world can be changed.

Amen