

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
November 8 & 9, 2014
Matt Moberg
Abundance of Grace
Luke 7: 36-50**

Good morning, everyone! How are we doing? All right! My name is Matt Moberg. I lead The Table, which is the Sunday night service at 5 p.m. We would love to have you join us and I *do* mean that. We would love to have you guys! A lot of people would benefit from knowing you. You're beautiful, a really good looking crowd this morning. Rich Phenow told me that and I thought he was kidding, but it's true. Let me pray quickly and we'll get into the Word.

Jesus, Your message of grace has changed the world. I pray this morning that it would change our lives. I pray, God, that You would speak to us however You see fit. We love You. And all God's children said, "Amen."

There is a writer by the name of David Kohan, who many years ago stumbled upon this old Jewish writing, teachings about man's will and grace. He was blown away by what he was reading, which said that to be fully human and experience the gift of grace, you need to surrender your will and allow God to move in your life. Grace is this thing that we cannot understand. We just watched that video and some of us are thinking, "Now I'm even more confused about grace." There was a worship song we sang last night with the words, "Too much to make sense of it all" but this guy, David Kohan, tried to make sense of it all. Being the creative type that he is, he made a television show called *Will & Grace*. Now if you've seen this show, you know that Grace Adler doesn't best embody our understanding of grace, but this is David Kohan's attempt to make sense of grace through the main characters of *Will & Grace*. You have this character, Will, representing man's will. The idea is that he is always in control. Life is clean. It is neat and in order. Everything lines up, but he has to have it his way. Then you have Grace, who is a little bit all over the map. She is loving, a great friend, but she's kind of crazy, too.

Kohan tries to make sense of this Biblical understanding of grace through Grace Adler. He falls short a lot of times but there is one moment where he really nails it, where you really get to see grace show up. It's a time when Will is looking at Grace. He's upset with her because she is paying more attention to his friend Jack. Wanting to control everything and be the center of attention, he gets upset. Grace knows Will is upset. She goes over to him, pulls him aside and says, "Will, before you have a full meltdown here on the scene, let me tell you something." She rolls up her sleeve and shows him this big scar on her arm and she says, "My love for you is like this scar. It is ugly and it's permanent. It stays with you." The story behind that scar is that she got it back in college when Will was going through a break-up and she heard about it. In the middle of a storm, she hops on a moped to go over to his place. She spills along the way, but she manages to go to Will to be with him, bleeding arm and all. Again, Grace Adler doesn't perfectly nail this idea of grace, but her character displays that sustained force that comes into

our lives and says, "Everything is going to be okay." Grace is that good news, that gift we do not deserve that God gives to us anyway. It's too much to make sense of it all.

In a Western-World mindset, I think we, me, specifically, struggle to make sense of it. I was born and raised in the Protestant work ethic that tells you that everything that is good and beautiful and desirable should be worked for, earned, purchased, won. I can't just receive it for no apparent reason. I don't know how to make sense of that. It does not fit in my paradigm. We are not the first ones to say, "What is this?" In fact, saying that grace is part of the paradigm is one of the earliest questions people struggled with, going all the way back to Exodus 16. That is the story of the Israelites being freed from slavery and then starving. They were walking through the wilderness complaining instead of saying "Thank You, God." They were saying, "You know, I would rather go back to Egypt because at least there, nutritionally, we were taken care of." Then there is this quail and they wake up in the morning and below this light dew, there is this bread, this flaky stuff called *manna*. Do you know what *manna* means in Hebrew? It literally means *what is this?* That's what it means.

The story with the Israelites goes on where they take this bread and Moses says, "Listen! You are not to keep it until the next morning. This is just for today. It is God's grace. It is going to meet you today. Trust me in the end that He is going to grace you again. Believe that." But the people, like Will, wanted to have control and said, "Forget that!" They pocketed some of the *manna* and held it till morning and it was full maggots and everything else that would tend to ruin it. Grace is that ability to let go of control and let God love you in profound and wonderful ways.

Of all 4,200-plus religions, not counting the few I tried to make up in elementary school, grace is that one unique thing that separates Christianity. Our faith is not one where we work toward heaven, where we have to earn our way toward God. We cannot climb to God. We tell the story of God who came down to us and that changes everything. I looked at a story in Scriptures this morning that highlights this well, this idea of Jesus being *for* us, this gift of grace, of God coming down because it is the ultimate gift. It is enough to know that we serve God, Jesus, who is *for* us and gives grace that will bless atheists and saints alike. Whether you ever turn and say *hi* to Jesus or not, doesn't change the way He feels about you. That's grace and that's a great gift. If you want to turn to Luke 7, that would be wonderful. Let me give you a little context here.

Right before this, Jesus is being verbally assaulted, more or less, by the Pharisees, saying that this man who is being called a prophet by the lunatics is a drunk and He's a glutton. He's a fraud. He's nothing but a hustler. Jesus is getting critiqued left and right. You cannot blame the Pharisees for this. The First Century Jewish understanding of what the Messiah would look like pictured that He would come and hang with theologians, not thugs, but that's what Jesus does. He hangs with the outcasts and the sinners and He gets critiqued for it, but side note: one of the best things anyone can say about a Christian is that you are somebody who hangs out with people nobody else wants to. That's what Jesus did and these people are verbally assaulting him. They hate Jesus. They find Him offensive and then they say, "Will You come over for dinner?" Now I don't know about you. Maybe you have more grace than I do, but when people hate me and talk a lot of noise about me like that, I don't always want to go over and have a burger with them. That's the last thing I want to do. I don't trust their intentions. I don't want to share a table with them. Jesus, though, accepts the invitation and the story goes like this.

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

Now there is something here that is really important that we don't readily see. It is that Jesus *goes into the house and reclines at the table*. He walks into the house and then immediately reclines at the table. Reclining was how they ate back then. They would lie down at the table and prop themselves up on an elbow with their feet away from the food, but there is a huge gaping absence of hospitality in this moment. To a First Century reader, this would have been absolutely appalling because in the Mediterranean social ethics of that day, hospitality was of the utmost importance. Esteeming your guests was above and beyond everything.

We've seen that throughout history in Scripture. In Genesis you have Abraham running out of his tent to slaughter animals. You see him bowing down and washing the feet of his guests. You have Lot, willing to give up his own daughters just to make sure that the dignity of his guests is not offended. But here when Jesus walks in, there is no hospitality, no warmth, and Jesus goes straight to reclining at the table. First Century readers of this story are already picking up notes that Jesus is basically being treated like a slave. He is being treated like the one kind of person you are not expected to eat with, who you are not socially obligated to love on with hospitality and warmth in an extravagant way. Then a woman shows up on the scene.

37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.

While the text is unclear about this, most scholars believe that this woman had had interaction with Jesus before. They believe that she had previously experienced the gift of His grace, the freedom, the love, so when she heard He was in town, she had to go see Him. They would also say, the scholars, that is, that this woman was a prostitute. That was what it meant to lead a sinful life. One of the ways we know that is because of the perfume. She brought Jesus perfume which was a tool of the trade. You've got to remember that this point of time is pre-deodorant and showers and soap bars and Tommy Hilfiger cologne. People didn't smell the best, so to be attractive you had to make yourself smell good. Greg Boyd actually says in one of his books that it is amazing human life survived in this stinky time in our history. But this woman had experienced God's grace before through Jesus and she rushes to the scene. She witnesses what is happening, seeing the one who has given her freedom and grace and hope for a better future being treated like a dog, and she is appalled. What is she to do but weep, so she weeps.

38 As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

Social ethics of the day would have said that no woman was to go up and touch a man, and men were not supposed to look at women like her, prostitutes. But Jesus, who is reclining, has a woman, a prostitute, come up to Him. She has been so transformed by this gift of grace that she doesn't care about the *status quo*. She doesn't care about people's expectations. She has no choice but to love extravagantly. That's what grace does. Anne Lamott says grace "meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us." Grace met this woman where she was, but never was going to leave her there, so here she is loving on Jesus.

There's something else important to take note of about what is happening here. Through the wiping of His feet and the kissing and the pouring out of perfume, she is taking on the role of the host. This is Simon the Pharisee's job, but this woman is taking it on herself. Grace is offended

when people are being told they are not worth it, that they are not accepted. Grace loves making sure that they replace that failing. Grace moves. Grace is alive.

39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." **40** Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said.

Simon naturally is appalled by this, but here is something I am appalled by, if I may. I get distracted very easily. I can't imagine having a conversation with Simon while somebody is crying and kissing my feet. It is as if that is not happening. It is what it is. But Jesus looks at Simon, despite Simon's ignorance, despite Simon's judgment, and says, "Simon, I have space for you, too. Let Me teach you in the midst of your hostility. Let Me show you what grace looks like" and He tells him a story in language that Simon understands.

41 "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. **42** Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

This Pharisee is being taught in his own language. You see, Pharisees had an understanding of life, similar to how we have an understanding of life. There is the right and there is the wrong. There is the pure and then there is the dirty. It was a very religious mindset that struggled to make sense of grace. Religious mindsets struggle to make sense of grace. You have to remember that the ultimate form of grace, Christ dying on the cross, the ultimate gift that God gave, was not out of gain, but because He so loved the world. God went to the cross not at the hands of racists or crooks, but at the hands of religious people who didn't know what to do with God embodied this way. They had no place in their paradigm to make sense of grace. Jesus entered into this time with Simon with a story, loving on humans in a profound way by making sense of it all.

43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Here's my favorite part of the story right here.

44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

While looking at the woman, He speaks to Simon. This woman is a prostitute. She has had many men look at her, but none have looked at her like this. A lot of men have looked at her and told her she was garbage, that she's not worth it, that she doesn't belong. She's had a lot of men look at her and try to purchase her, treat her like an object, like she is nothing but a piece of meat, but Jesus is so compelled by this woman that we see here, "Because I love her." He is speaking to Simon but He is looking at her. He asks, "Do you see this woman?" not as a tramp, but as a treasure. "Do you see this woman?" I think Jesus might be asking in the same spirit of grace, "Who in *your* life are you not fully seeing? Do you fully see your neighbor, the person at your office, the person sitting in the pew next to you? Do you fully see them?" As human beings, we are multi-layered people with stories behind our stories behind our stories, and we cannot judge based on the freeze frame of the moment.

A few years back when I was doing high school ministry, we took some kids with us on the 612 Experience, a ministry on the south side of Minneapolis. We would go down there with the kids and experience the life of the city. It was a beautiful thing. This one night we were out with MAD DADS [Men Against Destruction, Defending Against Drugs and Social-disorder]. The Minneapolis chapter of this ministry is led by V.J. Smith and we were out with him. We were patrolling the streets to ask for people's stories and we would end up praying for people. It was amazing.

At the end of an hour or two of going out there, we saw a prostitute on the street up ahead. Now I had never had a conversation with a prostitute before, so I didn't really know what was to come. The kids, there were about 10 or 12 kids, something like that, with us, and they were a little uncomfortable, but V. J. goes, "We need to talk to her. You need to know her story." V. J. yells to this lady who is up ahead of us on the street. He says, "Hey! Hey, you!" That is really how he went about it. She says, "What?" and he says, "We need you to come and talk to us." "No! I'm not going to come and talk to you!" If I were V. J., I would have said, "We tried. Let's go back. We're done." but V. J. says, "I'm going to go and talk to her."

He crosses the street and goes up to her and says, "Could you come and share your story with these kids? They need to hear it." V. J. has never met this woman before. She goes, "You know what I am. What do you want me to say? How could this be good for kids to hear?" He just says, "You have worth. You have! There is value in your story and these kids need to hear it." I don't know if she had ever been spoken to like that. She ends up coming across the street with V. J. and meets us on the other side. She is shaking, visibly nervous. She had never been in a moment like this. She stands before us and we are crowding around with these kids. She tells us how when she was five years old, her mom overdosed. Her dad ended up kicking her out of the house. She tried heroin when she was 10 years old. She has been abused and treated like garbage by men for the past 10 or 15 years. Now she is addicted to heroin, homeless, living a life of no hope because she stands on the street and sells her body, trying to get enough for food.

She is not just a prostitute though. She is informed by story after story, and if we do not see one another, the people in our community, beyond the freeze frames and snapshots that they seem to be in right now, we are not understanding that people are stories upon stories upon stories. We are going to turn into Pharisees. There is no place for grace to move when all we do is judge off freeze frames.

Jesus then turns back to Simon and says,

I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. **45** You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. **46** You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. **47** Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown.

Grace moves, forgives, and love is manifested. This is the result of grace.

But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." **48** Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." **49** The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who

even forgives sins?" **50** Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

When was the last time this woman has left the presence of men in peace? That is a gift of grace. It reminds me of that song where it says that those who are going in with weeping will come home with laughter and with joy. What a prophetic word, because that is exactly what is happening right here! Grace meets you where you are, but does not leave you where it found you. Love is fully received when we allow it to be formative and shape us into looking more like love. We cannot earn love. We cannot purchase love. It is a gift. If grace is a gift and it is the key thing about our Christian faith, the moment we start trying to earn love or purchase love is the moment we are betraying the gift that we received. We make this effort to live reformed lives, more consistent with the love we have received so we can love others the same way we have been loved. When we have been released from that which we deserve, we are to release others from that which they deserve.

I love the painting of this scene right here. [Slide shown.] Beautiful! I love how the woman before our eyes is turning into a butterfly. It is grace that tells us she no longer has to live in the cocoon. She is loved as she is right now. She is accepted as she is right now and can come out right now. Have you left your cocoon yet? You need to believe that you are loved and accepted, not based on what you do, not based on where you've been or the potential of your tomorrows, but who you are this morning, right now. Do you believe that God looks at you right now as you approach the table and turns to you and says, "You are beautiful"?

What I think about this story is that it's not hard for me to understand the eyes of the prostitute. I know what it's like to not be accepted and feel like I'm not worthy of God's love. When I was in middle school, I remember a youth group leader at church, saying to me, "Matt, you cannot come on this youth group trip we are going to take. You are a bad influence on the other kids." Okay. I wasn't accepted there, so I spent the next X-amount of years trying to get accepted elsewhere, whether it was the drinking or the drugs or friends, popularity, girls, whatever it might be. How was I going to find a place that *would* accept me? What did that look like then?

Standing before you this morning, holding a Bible in my hands is a huge feat for me. This is extreme for me every day, I kid you not. I talk with my wife about this all the time. When I come to work here at this church, it's like there is often a voice in my head that says, "Matt, if people really knew how messed up you are, if the cat got out of the bag If they imagined your history of addictions, of being a liar, a cheat, if they knew" Then I hear the voice of God saying, "You are accepted! There is space at the table!"

I want you to think about that. I want you to step into the skin of that prostitute as you are approaching the table where Jesus is sitting, maybe with people we view as our critics. Or maybe the people who are sitting around that table have the voices of self-doubt or the voices of our pasts. Maybe you are walking up there and they are saying, "No, no, no. That person. No, no, no, you don't belong here." Do you believe that Jesus can turn to you and say, "You are accepted. You are embraced. You are valuable. Not for the way you've been, not for the way you are going to be, because this is the gift of grace from Me to you. I love you." I want you to think about that.

I want us to have a moment of silence now. What I am going to do is have my wife come up here. She is going to close with a song. Take this moment to reflect on it. Do you believe that

God's gift of grace that cannot be purchased is here for you this morning and that Jesus is looking at you, saying, "I love you! You are welcome here! You belong at this table with me"? Close your eyes and think of these things.

[Pause.]

[Lauren Moberg sings *Amazing Grace*.]

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.