

The Redemption of Scrooge

Happy Advent, Church! Advent comes from a Latin word, which means "coming." In the Church calendar, the focus is on preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas, but also of preparation for His second coming. During this Advent season, along with the Scriptures, we'll be delving into the life of Ebenezer Scrooge, a character from Charles Dickens' classic, *A Christmas Carol*. We'll explore together, the change Scrooge goes through when he experiences the grace of God, firsthand.

I hope, in light of the sermon series we finished two weeks ago, adapted from Bishop Carter's book, *Unrelenting Grace*, and this series, *The Redemption of Scrooge*, you'll come to Christmas and the New Year 2024, excited, aware, reminded of one of the bedrocks of our faith – that God, in His infinite goodness, pours out grace upon grace on the most undeserving and unworthy. And that these people are in many ways just like you and me under the surface. If you have a Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 20:1-16. **Read Matthew 20:1-16.**

As a kid, my first paying job was working at the Spot in Sidney. I started there in the fall of my Junior year of high school. By that Christmas, I had saved up enough money to buy gifts for my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, Mom, Dad, Annie, and Ben. It was a great Christmas! You always hear, "It's more blessed to give than to receive," but until you are able to experience the other side – of giving, rather than receiving – it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Christmas, 1992, will always be a special one for me, for that reason.

Anyhow, we went out to Grandma and Grandpa Dorsey's on Christmas Day around lunchtime. Grandma Berryman went along with us, and Grandma Freistuhler – Grandma Dorsey's mom – walked across the street to come over for lunch and opening gifts. I actually walked across the street to get her, and walk her back over to make sure she didn't fall.

Who Is Ebenezer Scrooge?

She was a really short woman. Probably 4'10" I suppose, and would've been close to 80 years old by this point I suppose. I had bought her a sparkling flower shaped, fake gem encrusted brooch about the size of a half dollar from Sears. I put a lot of thought into getting her that gift – I thought since she had the greenhouse there in Port Jefferson that she'd think it was pretty cool.

I waited to pass my gifts out to the aunts, uncles, and grandparents until after all the kids had opened their stuff. Most of them expressed gratitude in receiving

something, except Grandma Freistuhler. She opened the box, looked at the pin, and said, “What am I going to do with this? It’ll rip up my shirts!” And Grandma Dorsey, her daughter, said, “Fine, I’ll take it,” and yanked it out of her hands, and kept it for herself. I thought Grandma Freistuhler always seemed grumpy – very much like Ebenezer Scrooge. In fact, as a kid, the first time I watched the Disney Christmas movie starring Scrooge McDuck, as Ebenezer Scrooge, I remember thinking to myself, “Man! He acts a lot like Grandma!”

If you’ve ever read Dickens’ book, or watched one of the movie recreations of that familiar story, you know who I’m talking about when I say Ebenezer Scrooge. He’s stingy, greedy, and just a grumpy old man. He does have one great love of his life, though. Money. Scrooge is crazy about money.

In the cartoon movie, Scrooge sits into the late hours of the night counting every single coin, and then recounting them, over and over again. In a way, Scrooge lives into a Biblical principle. “You reap what you sow,” (Gal. 6:7), but he takes it to the extreme. In the parable, Jesus tells in the Gospel lesson today, we hear an echoing, in a way, of workers in a vineyard identifying with Scrooge’s very human perspective. There’s some people in His vineyard with an expectation that they should be given more.

God’s Economy

Notice what Jesus says about the economy God values. He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them to his vineyard,” (Matt. 20:1-2). It’s very interesting that Jesus would compare God’s kingdom to the landowner. I think that’s a key takeaway here today.

He goes out, offers to pay the workers a denarius – basically this is minimum wage, so about \$10 an hour – and they agree to work for that amount. So, they’re working in the vineyard from sun-up to sundown, and he pays them we’ll say \$100 or \$120 for the work day. The owner goes at 9:00, and gets more workers, and again at noon, 3:00, and even 5:00 in the afternoon, and sends them all to work in his vineyard, (verses 3-7, paraphrased). Then notice what happens in the parable.

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius,” (verses 8-9). Okay, now, let’s think about this for a minute. That’s that minimum wage amount the first set of workers agreed to work for, right?

So here we have a group of workers, who we’re told later only put in one hour of work, getting paid \$100 or \$120. That’s a pretty good gig! “So when those came who

were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner, (verses 10-11). Here we go – pay attention to what they say! “These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day,’” (verse 12).

Who Do They Think They Are?

See, they aren’t happy. They’re grumpy. Being greedy, having a mindset that says, “I did this, that, and the other, and so I’m entitled to get more.” They feel like they aren’t being treated fairly. Our society has this preoccupation with fairness, and everything being equal for all people. Life doesn’t work that way, though. Life is unfair.

It isn’t fair when a child is born with a birth defect. It isn’t fair when a child is born into a family ill-equipped, or even unable, to care for it. It isn’t fair when an elderly person without relatives is put into the county home and given sub-quality care because all their money’s been used up. Life can be very unfair – instead of “crying a river,” as the saying goes, our society needs to “build bridges and get over it.” “The landowner answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last,” (verses 13-16).

The landowner asks the disgruntled worker some really good questions. The workers agreed beforehand to work for the set wage. Who do they think they are, to tell him what to do with his money? Besides just being about a landowner and vineyard workers, there’s a very deep theological level to this parable. If God is the Landowner, and His people who were hired first worked for Him, and reaped the benefit, and then other people later came to Him and continued the work, who do those first workers think they are, to dictate what God ought to do regarding the giving of His kingdom?

We could read the Jewish/Christian relationship into this parable. They were the first workers, and we’re the workers who’ve come later in the day, earning the full wages of God’s kingdom. We should also look at it through the lens of God’s grace displayed to us at the crucifixion of Christ to purchase us from sin and death. Perfect followers of the Old Testament Law didn’t need a Savior – but only One Person was able to perfectly follow it – and He paid the ultimate price to set us free.

Aligning Our Lives with the Holy Scriptures

God’s economy doesn’t follow the same rules as the world. His gift of free grace is given to us – we can’t earn it, no matter how hard we try. In another parable, Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). In that story, the rich man begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers of their

doom if they continue living the way they've always lived. In *A Christmas Carol*, one of the first events we hear of is the visitation by Marley's ghost to Scrooge – rattling chains and all – attempting to offer Scrooge a warning to change his ways, to align his life with principles found in the Holy Scriptures, and to put the needs of others ahead of himself.

This Advent, how do we do that, as a local church? How do we see all the people – regardless of economic status, race, gender, and so on – as beloved children of the Most High God? As individuals, how do we prioritize and determine what we love and value, in light of what God loves and values?

We can't earn God's grace. He gives it to us freely, and expects us to share it with others. When we do that, we draw nearer to Christ. We recognize that He's present, living with us, and that we have been put here – in this time and place – for the purpose of serving our Father, and sharing His love for others, with others. The thing God wants from us is to love Him, and love others. That's the bottom line.

We love, in gratitude, because He first loved us. That means, sometimes, getting out of our comfort zones, and being involved with, and around people that are grumpy, who act like Scrooge, and who aren't very lovable – at least not yet. We're called – you're called, New Hope Church – to take the sour grapes all around us in the world, and squeeze them into a sweet wine, fit for our coming King, who used the imagery of wine to remind His followers of His precious blood, poured out in love for us, and for all people.

Prayer: Gracious God, give us eyes to see the unhappy and the misunderstood, and the ears to hear their story. Help us to share Christ through humble invitation, especially with those who are in need of healing. May Christ's welcoming Spirit live within us. Amen.