



Great Ends of the Church #6:

Grace

1 Peter 1:3-4, 13-16
1 Corinthians 12:12-27

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How many of you like Ben and Jerry's ice cream? What a question! Well, try this one: Why do people like their ice cream so much? The short answer is because it's rich and good. But how did it get that way?

It turns out that there were these two guys, trying to get a business started, since they couldn't keep a job. They took a correspondence course in ice cream making, and got to work, mixing stuff up. Naturally, since they were young, it was the seventies, and they *are* men, they wanted the best-tasting, most satisfying ice cream they could make. Jerry made the samples, Ben taste-tested them.

There was a problem: Jerry would make ice cream according to the recipes, but Ben always wanted more flavor. They both liked chunks of nuts and things, but finally Jerry was adding three times as much flavor as the recipe called for before Ben would okay the batch.

And you love it, and I love it. There's more flavor there than we ever knew we liked.

Here's the good part: later, they found out why Ben wanted more flavor: he had a chronic sinus condition, and had almost no sense of taste! Of course, it's not the first time that our nation's taste has been set by someone without any... But we do enjoy the results.

The Kingdom of God, or as our Great End for the day puts it, the Kingdom of Heaven, is like Ben and Jerry's: more than we could have imagined, at least until we tasted it – and then want more. The Church displays the Kingdom in its life, and so does Valley Presbyterian Church. When I describe Valley to someone who hasn't ever experienced this congregation, sampled our fellowship, I tell them that we've got people from one political pole to the other, one theological pole to the other, women and men who could disagree about almost anything, all sitting

together in worship, working and praying and doing things together, having a great time, because we're celebrating what we have in common, what builds us up, not concentrating on our differences. That is a common definition of grace: "a capacity to tolerate, accommodate, or forgive people." That is one way that Valley Presbyterian Church shows grace, and in showing grace, exhibits the Kingdom.

But even that grace we show is just an approximation of the Kingdom. Store-brand vanilla that's gotten all icy and gunky. Sometimes even worse than that.

The Church is sent out into the world to be an example of what reality will be like in the Kingdom. And that despite the fact that churches have a tendency to leave a bad taste in some people's mouths. What should be our specialty, relationships, too often isn't. We're a long way from perfection. But knowing you need a lot of work is itself a sign of the Kingdom: being able to realize how far away you are from where you need to be. That's part of why we say a prayer of confession together every week.

Dear Abby used to get letters all the time slamming the hypocrites in this church or that. Answering the complaints that there are gossip mongers, liars, cheats, and just unpleasant people in church, she reminded her writers that "churches are hospitals for sinners, not museums for saints." That's painfully true.

We all know very well, and from too much experience, that the capital "C" Church is made up of little "c" churches, and that they are very human institutions, made up of very imperfect people. The politics of peoples, businesses, and every petty human ego deficiency are writ large upon the history of the Church of Jesus Christ. They show, big as anything, right in the Bible – think of the arguments among the disciples, Paul's letters to the churches he shepherded about their infighting, not to mention the book of Acts and the seven churches in Revelation.

The Roman Catholic Church is going through terrible revelations of horrible deeds of abuse over the centuries, and its inbred self-protection of its own leadership: a tragic, continuing betrayal of trust. But even in that is a glimmer of the Kingdom: the Pope himself declared this week that all this is the fault of the Catholic Church itself, that its greatest threat comes from problems of its own making, and that, quote, "the church needs to profoundly relearn penitence, accept purification, learn forgiveness [and] justice."

Some will say, "It's only words." But those are amazing words, actions in and of themselves, an acknowledgement that they know they are far from the Kingdom. That is truly revolutionary for the Vatican, a pretty encouraging statement for any human institution.

So how is it that the Church exhibits the Kingdom? Arguments and division and power struggles are not reasons for the church, and certainly not how the church exhibits the Kingdom. That is done in the ways we overcome those failings.

In the movie, "The African Queen," Humphrey Bogart is the skipper of a small steam boat helping English missionary Katherine Hepburn escape from German

soldiers at the start of World War One. He's also a drunk, and they've got cases of Gordon's Gin in the boat with them, which Bogart tucks right into.

Good and drunk, he's rude and insolent toward Hepburn. He finally passes out, and awakens the next morning to find her pouring out the last of the gin into the river. There's a delicious camera shot back along their course, which shows a forest of empty gin bottles bobbing along. "Miss!" he cries. "For the love of God! It's only human nature!"

To which she primly replies, "Human nature is what God put us on this Earth to overcome."

And overcome it we do, by degrees. As Presbyterians, we are what is called Reformed; one of our ancient mottos is: "The church: reformed, and always reforming." Rather than sit on the past, we dive back into Scripture, seeking to understand God and Christ in each new generation and situation, trying to find and show a better way through the new wildernesses the world puts in our path.

And at the same time, work toward the other goals of the Church. Last week we talked about helping people we know; here we help thousands of people we'll never meet. Some of us will visit a sick friend; here, we visit hundreds a year. We might, once in a lifetime, manage to tell someone about what God has done in our lives and for theirs: as a church, we do it many times a day. What for any one of us would be sharing a taste of the Kingdom banquet, as a church we flavor the whole community. Together, we gather to recall and feast on what God has done and continues to do among us – and so the Church calls attention to, broadens, and invites men and women to experience God's work.

Paul's words to the Corinthian church (which, remember, was a local church just like VPC) bring out the shared work and shared reward. The church is made up of individuals, and it's what God gives those individuals that makes the church a piece of the Kingdom. He compares the church to a body: "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

But it works to think of us as a wonderful dish, too. We each bring our own flavor to the whole, an ever-changing, magnificent stew. And those flavors provide a meal of grace, grace we show in tolerance, accommodation, and forgiveness; in polite and decent behavior.

And then there's God's grace. The grace of God is "the infinite love, mercy, favor and goodwill shown to humankind by God." That is what makes *us* gracious: God's grace. Ben and Jerry were just two imperfect guys, trying to do something better than they were capable of doing. It was a bit of grace – Ben's imperfect taste – that made them great, and gave us something that tastes truly wonderful.

Church is the nexus between the beauty and grace of God and the messiness of people and the world. It is in the glitches, the sticking points, the pinches, that the Kingdom flashes at us.

The grace of God works not just when things are all aligned and everybody's happy and there are no typos in the bulletin; it works in the messy places and dark corners, when we slip up and even when bad things happen. God's grace and the Kingdom show when we are upset and disappointed, in loss and in tragedy – in every part of the life of Christ's Church, and our church. It's in the flavor, in this rich stew that is all of us, that we can savor God's grace – O taste and see that the Lord is good! It's where adding too much is just a hint, a foretaste of the feast to come. Maybe that's why we're always eating at church!

I sometimes describe Valley as just like any other church – only more so. It is an Oasis of grace – it's not the Kingdom, but it is a place where, on its best days and in its best moments, you can taste it – taste the goodness and grace of God enough to excite our hopes for a real treat when the Kingdom arrives in its full glory. In the desert of the world, with all its pain and frustration, here is a oasis where there's more than you ever imagined, a place to stop and rest, eat and drink, and be refreshed...no matter who you are. Thanks be to God for the grace of our human frailty.