

"God's Grace is Enough"

"Biggest Losers in the Bible" part 1

Acts 4:23-37

[title slide] Good morning. This is a beautiful day to worship God together. Would do me a favor? Simply turn to the person sitting next to you, and tell them, "I'm glad you're here." The truth is, we cannot be the church alone. God has called us into relationships, with Jesus Christ and with each other. This might be the time and place where, for the first time in your life, you realize that the Creator of the Universe is madly in love with you, and wants you to be a part of this family of faith. I hope you are ready to accept that invitation today.

As I lead us in prayer, I invite you to extend your hands, palms up, ready to receive what God offers you in this moment. Let's pray.

Lord God, creator of heaven and earth and all that we have, show us this morning the grace you have for us. Allow us to listen with open minds and open hearts so that we can respond to your great grace, love, mercy, and power. Show us your Son, Jesus Christ, and his deep love for us. Mold us and shape us for ministry to this hurting world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

[church people] Once a pastor explained to his congregation that the church would take up a special offering for a project, so he asked them to consider being more than generous. He offered that whoever gave the most would be able to pick three hymns. After the plates were passed about the church, the pastor glanced down and noticed that someone had graciously given a \$100 bill. He was so excited that he immediately shared his joy with his congregation and said he'd like to personally thank the person who placed the money in the plate. A very quiet, elderly, saintly lady in the back of the church

shyly raised her hand. The pastor asked her to come to the front, so she slowly she made her way towards him. The pastor told her how wonderful it was that she gave so much, and in thanks he asked her to pick out three hymns. Her eyes brightened as she looked over the congregation. She pointed to the three most handsome men in the church and said, "I'll take him and him and him."¹

[world, money] Now, we may giggle a little at that story, but underlying it is a truth we are not so fond of. When we give, too many times, we are expecting something in return. We live in a world that mainly encourages selfishness, not generosity. When we examine our own giving, too often, we are asking, “What am I going to get out of this?”

I know. I once thought that way, too. I spent nine years pursuing a career in civil engineering because I was told, “There are really good jobs out there for engineers.” There’s nothing wrong with engineering...that field might have served me well, except for one problem. I wasn’t passionate about engineering. I wasn’t going to build things to help other people. I was simply looking for job security and a big paycheck. And even though I earned \$47,000 a year right out of college, I became depressed. I was not satisfied with life. It took me years to finally find my calling was in ministry. But I had to see beyond my selfishness first.

We like to think that just because we are inside these four walls every Sunday morning, we are immune from the selfish influences of the world, but sadly, we are not. The messages we hear, the people we see in the media, the very commercials we watch, are all aimed at making us unsatisfied with life, and they all have a product that is going to make everything better, if we just spend enough on it. Right? No way!

¹ from jokes4us.com.

[Give/share word-cloud] I can tell you this. There were plenty of people in my life who were generous, who did think of others first, and their influence in my life did not go unnoticed. I remember my friend, Annie, the elderly lady who adopted our family as her own. She gave us her life. Truly. When she couldn’t drive anymore, she gave us her car. She paid for us to take a tour of England, my very first chance to see Europe. When she died, she willed her house to my family. Annie did all these things, not because she was lonely or looking to gain a favor in return. She was generous because she loved. She believed in a loving and generous God, and so she modeled her life the same way.

[verses] In the Bible, Jesus says, “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” (**Matthew 16:25**) Jesus also asked, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (**Mark 8:36**) People like Annie taught me that when it comes to giving and grace, we should strive to be the biggest “losers” around, biblically speaking.

The truth is, the Church is expected to be generous. And sometimes that puts me, as the pastor, in a hard position, when I receive a phone call asking, “Can I get some help from the church?” Their assumption is a good one, is: The church does help people. So I try to explain, actually, God helps people through us; I cannot speak on behalf of whole congregation. But I do try to help.

[verse] I want to be a generous person. In **Luke 6:35**, Jesus says to give without expecting anything in return. That’s a hard thing for me. Maybe it is for you, too.

There is a solution, though. It’s God’s grace. We are supposed to live like God’s grace is enough. Just like the lyrics of the song we just sang. If we truly

believe that God’s grace provides everything that we need, we will live as generous people, no matter what our bank statement says.

We read from Acts, Chapter 4, this morning, a great, encouraging story from the days of the early Christian Church. The first apostles were marked by four things: Prayer, witness, miracles, and generosity. Their prayers were amazing, literally shaking the building. They boldly told others about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They performed real miracles with the help of the Holy Spirit. And last, and certainly not least, they were unbelievably generous.

Why were they this way? The answer, according to Acts 4:33, is “God’s grace was powerfully at work in them all.”

[Esther and the king] The Greek word for grace is “charis,” like the English word, charity. It means several things: favor, kindness, or literally leaning towards someone or “extending” to share a benefit. The king extended his scepter toward Esther to show her his favor and blessing. (Esther 4:11) Jesus Christ freely extended himself on the cross, giving himself away to save the world. God also freely gives us his favor, reaching out to us, leaning toward us. God wants to be near us and bless us.

[early disciple giving] The apostles knew this grace. They could sing “Lean on Me.” They all gave, and they didn’t consider anything that they owned to be only for their benefit. One man in particular is singled out in Acts 4: Joseph, whom the disciples renamed Barnabas, or “encourager.” Joseph was not the first one to give, nor the last. His gift wasn’t really any different than anyone else’s. Yet because of his generosity, he was renamed to “Barney the Encourager.”

When we know God’s grace is all-sufficient in our lives, we can be great encouragers as well. We can be the “Barney Rubbles” to the world’s Fred

Flintstones. We can be full of love, life and generosity when we know the grace of the one who gave his all for us: Jesus Christ.

When I look at this story in Acts, I have a burning desire to see the church be same. We ought to live and give the way God gives us grace. We shouldn’t give because we want something for ourselves. We should give because we believe God is doing something incredible through us, and we don’t want to miss it.

Barnabas responded to God’s grace. He wasn’t looking to get glory or honor from it. And yet, he did become famous. The apostles named him “The Encourager.” That’s who I want to be. Do you, too?

[Hands, heart] Everyone has benefitted somehow from God’s grace in their lives. If I were to put an open microphone in this room, we could fill up the next hour with testimonies about God’s grace and encouragement.

[crosses] Today you have the opportunity to receive another blessing: forgiveness through communion. We have the grace of God because Jesus Christ took our sin with him to the cross, so that we could experience a right relationship with God. All of our sin is forgiven. Those times we were stingy and didn’t respond in love or generosity? Forgiven. Nailed to the cross. Those times we turned our back on God? Forgiven because of the cross.

Through communion, you again have the opportunity to say, “Lord, I’m yours to use as You wish. Any time. Any place. Anything. Any cost.” In fact, that should be a goal for every person here: To first give ourselves to the Lord. Totally. Completely. No strings attached. Lose your life so that you can find it.

[title slide] God’s grace is enough in your life. Respond to God’s grace. Make yourself available to the Holy Spirit. Consecrate your time, your talents and

your treasure to God for use in the ministry here at Houghton Grace United Methodist Church. Be a Barney.

During our time of communion, I encourage you to think about how God’s grace has been made available in your life through the church. If you haven’t already, you are invited to fill out a Faith Promise Card to make a commitment to support the ministries of this church in the following year. We are collecting these cards every Sunday month in the offering plates. And yes, if you put one in, you can choose a hymn – a song, not a person. Already, six cards have been turned in, for a total of \$19,681. That includes the promise made by Painesdale UMC. We have only just started, and we are already experiencing God’s grace and encouragement in abundance.

Paul says in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” God’s grace is enough. Say it with me. God’s grace is enough.

Would you join me in prayer?

Memory Verse

2 Corinthians 8:7 (NRSV) - “Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”

Reflection questions

1. What is the most amazing act of generosity you have ever received?
2. When have you been part of a team that truly cared for others more than self?
3. What does it mean to have God’s grace work powerfully in you? (See Acts 4:33)
How is God’s grace different from God’s power?
4. What can we as the church “lose” in order to show the world that we are full of God’s grace?
5. How can you personally show Jesus your gratitude for his grace during this coming week?