

“Discovering Grace in Your Relationships”

theme: Grace Through Relationships

Arlington Congregational Church

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John 13:1-17, 31-35 NRSV

¹Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” ⁷Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” ⁸Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” ⁹Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.” ¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This morning I want to begin a new series of messages about “Grace through relationships.” Now in its simplest meaning I want to talk about the ways that we can find greater love in our relationships. My hope is that through these messages you will find greater satisfaction in all your relationships.

Now it would be easy to find satisfaction in relationships except for the fact that relationships generally involve other people! Right? I mean finding satisfaction in relationships is a pretty tough thing sometimes isn't it?

If relationships were easy, then they wouldn't be such a source of cheap jokes would they? Like the one about the man who went to the priest to ask him to exorcize the demon he had been living with for the past twenty years. The priest asked how the demon got into his life, he said, "It happened when I said, 'I do.'"

Or the man who was on his way home from his 25th wedding anniversary and his wife looked over and saw a tear in his eye, and she said, "Oh, George are you getting sentimental?" And he said, "not really, I was remembering that your father threatened to have me thrown in jail for 20 years is I didn't marry you. I could have been free five years ago if I had just taken his offer."

Ok, bad jokes aside, it is true that relationships are difficult at time. But I want to suggest to you a way to find greater grace – through the spiritual truth that Christ shares with his disciples in this passage. We are going to consider a lot of different relationships throughout the month, but today I want to start with our closest relationships and look at them through the same lens as the relationships between disciples that Jesus speaks about.

Probably all of us are familiar with this passage where Jesus washes the disciples' feet. It is an example he sets for them that we are called to follow even today. But while we might be able to symbolically "wash" the feet of others it might be hard to love them. It is hard to command love, even when it is Jesus giving the command. You cannot very well command a "feeling." But the

beauty of this is that Jesus knew this. The Master of emotions, the Lord of love understands that he cannot command emotion, so he gave us an example of love in action. He demonstrated that love requires more than a feeling. He says this is the measuring stick the world will use to decide if we are truly his followers or not.

But I want to start at the place before you take action. I believe that Christ demonstrated in his life and ministry 3 things that bring grace to relationships. I think these three things are essential if you want to discover greater grace in all your relationships, especially those with your family, your beloved, those who we so often treat with the least grace.

So let me first take a little time to describe and define what I mean when I talk about grace. Grace is a theological term that means unmerited love. It is quite similar to our word serendipity, only it is not just a surprising blessing, it is the surprising blessing of knowing and experiencing love, especially God's love. I like the more secular meaning of grace too – to be a graceful person doesn't just mean someone who moves well, it can mean someone who strive to allow another person to save face, to seek to assist another person to "win" when it would be easier to make them feel like a loser. We all enjoy being around a person of grace who never makes us feel like the bumbling fool we know we can be.

I have to tell you, if you want to know more about what grace really is, if

you want to experience grace in ways you might never have before you ought to do yourself a favor and sign up for the Via de Cristo weekend retreat. The central experience of that weekend, the defining fact of that retreat is that you will experience and come to understand God's grace more than you might in any other way in your life. It is, as we call it, "a grace-filled weekend." But grace is the gift of God's love and that is essentially what Christ is calling us to share with one another as disciples, and I would suggest that ought to overflow into our relations with others, especially those closest to us.

So now, what about those three key elements to experience grace, the three steps to discovering greater grace in your relationships? Let me share them with you now.

I would suggest the beginning point for finding greater grace is for us to strive to understand the other person. Now, notice I did not say, try to get the other person to understand us. We've already tried that. We've explained why we acted badly, we've made excuses, we've cast blame around to others all in an attempt to demand that others understand us and accept our behavior. But how many of us have tried to sit back and understand the other person before we have hauled off and torn them a new ..., well, before we bite their head off? I don't mean just overlook, or pretend it didn't happen. I mean how often have we taken a deep breath, and asked the other person to help us understand their point of view, their thinking, their reasons for what they

have done that we might be tempted to be angry about? If my first priority is to understand – compassionately understand – why the other person chose to do what they did.

I believe the encounters Jesus had with people often included reference to his ability to understand them, to have compassion on them because he understood them, and to show that in his mercy and grace toward them. The woman at the well who had been in many relationships but not found much grace is one example. Going to eat with Zaccheus, hated for being what and who he was, was an act of understanding, of compassion and of grace that set Zaccheus free to become someone else, someone better.

One of the most powerful insights I found from reading, and rereading Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, was the simple statement: "If I were you I would have done/felt/thought/acted the same way." When I finally got to the heart of that I realized the deep truth of that and it led me to work harder at understanding instead of jumping to judgments and criticisms.

The second step in finding more grace, greater grace in our relationships emerges out of that understanding. It is to forgive. Now forgiveness follows understanding because if you truly understand why the person did what they did you will be able to forgive. Forgiveness does not overlook personal accountability. It does not give license for repeat abuses. It does not condone evil or even bad behavior. It expresses

the holiness of God who forgives us and those who trespass against us. Our prayer expresses it this way: forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. How can we expect forgiveness if we offer none?

I have found that when I understand the other person's point of view, forgiveness becomes easier. I can truly let go of the bitterness, resentment, and hard feelings I might be tempted to hold onto if I will understand and forgive. I urge you to try it with those you are in relationship with and see if it doesn't unlock greater grace. There is much more to be said about this but for now, let us just make this the appetizer and I promise I will come back to this element of grace in future weeks.

For now, let me share the third element that I think will bring greater grace to your relationships. It is the act of "blessing." Yes, I am a big advocate of seeking to bless as a way to know greater grace than seeking to be blessed.

I think we are the victims of the "Burger King" generation. That is we have fully bought into the motto BK used to use: "Have it your way." The fall-out from this self-centered consumer mentality is that we have taken it into every aspect of our lives. We have begun to look at relationships as if we are consumers. You are supposed to fulfill my wishes, you are supposed to provide my happiness, you are responsible for delivering everything I expect, "my way." When you don't, God help you.

How about this: you want to know how to find greater blessing from your relationships? Ask how you can be a greater blessing. I mean that literally. I went to the trouble this morning to print out a card for you to use the next month while I am doing this message series. On it I have challenged us all to do two things in connection with those with whom we want a better relationship. First, pray for them. Ask God how you can be a blessing to them, and to have the spirit, the desire to be a blessing. Then I have challenged us all to ask the other person, "How can I be blessing to you today?" Spouses, use this with your beloved. Parents, ask this of your children. Children, want to get an easy laugh – ask your parents what you can do to be a blessing and watch them fall out of their chair. Ask your teacher, ask your boss, ask that stupid coworker who drives you nuts, ask that neighbor with the yappy dog... want to see more grace in your relationships? Become a foot-washer. Become a blesser, instead of sitting around complaining about everyone who doesn't bless you.

I promise you if you try this over the next month you will be able to stand up and testify how good God is, and how you have discovered greater grace in your relationships. I'm going to be asking for volunteers in the coming weeks. I'm in, how about you? Want to find greater grace in your relationships. Try being a person of grace. Try showing the love God has shown you in Jesus Christ. Don't be surprised if you are surprised at what happens. Amen.