

THE GRACE OF GOD  
York United Ministries  
New Hope, King City and York Pines United Churches  
Sunday, September 20, 2020

Hello! Hello! That's a typical English greeting. Hello! Or the shortened form, Hi! Do you know what it means? In other languages, greetings are more obvious. Bon jour. Buenas Dias. It's a wish, a blessing for the other person, "I hope you have a good day." The word "hello", however, is not nearly so expressive or obvious. Do you know what it means?

The Oxford dictionary gives its origins from an old German verb meaning to fetch, especially used of a ferryman. And so it's a greeting drawing the attention of the ferryman to your presence. In and of itself our typical English greeting doesn't mean much. The sentiment behind it is conveyed more by the facial expression or the tone of the voice rather than the word itself. Whether your eyes meet, or whether they don't. It can mean anything from "I'm so glad to see you!" to "Oh, no! Not you again!"

The typical Roman greeting was much the same, χαίρε. It comes from the more positive root verb meaning to rejoice but means much the same thing as hello. Around the time of Paul, actually probably initiated by Paul himself, the Christian greeting became χαρισ, grace.<sup>1</sup> Χαίρε to χαρισ. A small change, you

hardly notice the difference, but what a difference it makes.

Χαρις, grace, is the root from which we get the words, Eucharist, the Lord's Supper where the freely given gifts of God are received, charity, the free sharing of gifts, charisma, charism, charismatic and charm. A charismatic person is one who has received the free gifts of God.

And so the Christian greeting is not simply χαίρε, hello, how are you? I'm glad to see you. The Christian greeting is χαρις, grace. May God be gracious to you. May God bestow on you God's undeserved, unmerited blessings. May God be better to you than you deserve.

Isn't that a marvelous greeting? It's a wonderful thing to hear and to be greeted by blessing. May God be better to you than you deserve. Grace to you.

It's marvelous to hear when you hunger and thirst. In Isaiah 55, God says, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. And those who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."<sup>2</sup> God is better to you than you deserve. What good news for the hungry!

Good news also for the lonely, for the stranger. Isaiah paints a picture of Israel calling to other nations they do not know and like lost children, these other nations shall run home. "Nations that knew you not shall run to you."<sup>3</sup> God is better to them than they deserve.

Good news also for the needy and the weak. Remember

that inspiring passage from Isaiah, Chapter 40. "God gives power to the faint, and to those who have no might God increases strength....They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."<sup>4</sup> God helps those who cannot help themselves. God is better to them than they deserve.

And Good News to those who sin, those who are shackled by guilt, those who have wandered away from God. "Let the wicked and the unrighteous return to God, for God will abundantly pardon."<sup>5</sup> God is better to them than they deserve. Grace. Grace to them. Grace to you. God's grace, it's amazing and marvelous.

But is it always? Is it really? What if you're not hungry and thirsty, but rather you are those called to share your food and drink with others.

Suppose you are not lonely. Suppose you have a warm and loving community where you are safe and comfortable in your circle, and you are asked to break that circle, to turn outward and to welcome into your midst the stranger.

Some years ago, a member of the Richmond Hill United Church choir had a heart transplant and then after Easter she reflected on that experience in the morning sermon. One of her insights was this. Within her body was the stranger, a new heart. The new heart brought hope and new life. Yet every fiber of her

being as part of her genetic makeup rejected the stranger and tried to kill it. So it is with us in our faith's journey and in the life of many churches, we reject the strangers in our midst, even though those strangers bring new life. Have you ever found the stranger occupying your pew, your ministry, your office, your place, and you found yourself not welcoming that experience?

Suppose you are not one of the weak. You are among the strong. You have made your way in life through hard work and ingenuity. You deserve what you have. Why should others get what you have free? Why should God give to others beyond what they deserve and merit? Why should those who haven't been here through the long haul, who haven't struggled and sacrificed and worked like we have, why should they prosper simply because God is gracious. They don't deserve it, do they? It rubs against the grain, it contradicts our prevailing way of thinking, it conflicts with our vision of how things should be. Don't we fundamentally believe that people get, or at least should get, what they deserve?

But we know that isn't true, don't we? Jesus says in Luke's Gospel that God is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish.<sup>6</sup> In a similar passage in Matthew, Jesus says that God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and unjust.<sup>7</sup> That's true, isn't it? And it's a major problem. Good people sometimes suffer and undeserving people sometimes prosper. As Homer Simpsons' boss Mr. Burns said, "Whoever

said cheaters never prosper never saw my bank account.” God’s impartial providing for those who don’t deserve it is a problem. God’s grace is not just amazing; it’s maddening.

Would you run the world that way if you were God?

No, in my world it would be God helps those who help themselves. None of this “may God be better to you than you deserve.” No, may God be only as good to you as you deserve. That’s only fair. Isn’t it? This amazing grace, it’s maddening.

“But,” God says, “But, my ways are not your ways. My thoughts are not your thoughts. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts.”<sup>8</sup>

In the reading this morning Jesus told a story about the ways of God. A farmer hired labourers to work his fields. He hired them at different times of the day from early morning until late and when the workday ended he paid them all the same wage, regardless of when they started. He paid each one, one day’s wages, enough to survive for one day.

Was that fair? You can just imagine the grumbling. How unjust! Some work only one hour and they get the same pay as those of us who have borne the burden of the whole day and the scorching heat.

“What’s the problem?” the farmer asks. “I have paid you according to our agreement. Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to these others as I give to you. Do you begrudge

my generosity?"<sup>9</sup>

You know the answer to that, don't you? "Yes, yes, I do. I do begrudge your generosity. It's not fair." If you were one of them could you say, Grace to you? May God be better to you than you deserve.

We all know the story of the prodigal son. It's a favourite. It warms the heart. If this was a major run movie we'd all have our hearts in our throats and a tissue at our eyes. But is it fair?

If this story was told from a different perspective, from the viewpoint of the brother, wouldn't it be somewhat different? Perhaps completely different. Instead of an open heart, we might have clenched fists. Is it fair? While your brother was away enjoying the good life, you slugged it out at home. You made the farm what it is today. Now he returns with nothing and becomes part of the family again sharing what you worked so hard to achieve as if he never left. Would you go to the party? Would you? Or would you resent every second of it? This amazing grace of God is maddening.

Perhaps the reason it's maddening is because no one has ever said to us and meant it, Grace to you. May God be better to you than you deserve. Perhaps it's because we haven't really heard it yet. Sure, we've heard it, but we haven't **heard** it. We haven't really experienced for ourselves the marvelous good news of God's amazing grace. Perhaps we ourselves haven't really experienced the reality that God is better to us than we deserve,

that what is being granted to the latecomers is no more deserved by us than it is by them.

I remember being in a sensitivity group some years ago when a woman with tears in her eyes and wavering in her voice told about how unhappy her name had made her. She had grown up in the church, but had never felt worthy of God's love. She always felt as if she wasn't good enough for God, that God couldn't and didn't love her because her behaviour wasn't righteous enough, because she didn't deserve it, and so she always felt on the outside, lonely, estranged from God and indeed from other people, hungry and thirsting for sustenance beyond bread and water. But she was always unsatisfied and felt rejected because she was so undeserving. And so she hated her name which stood for the love of God you had to earn. Her name? Grace!

How unbelievable! How totally backward was her understanding. "Grace, you've gotten it wrong," we said. "You've gotten it backward. Grace is the love of God you don't need to earn. It is undeserved, unwarranted, unmerited. It's free."

Grace started to cry. For the first time in her life, she heard her name being called and she knew what it meant, Grace. May God be better to you than you deserve.

A minister sat at his desk working, writing a sermon. His young daughter came in opening the closed, but not locked, door.

She sat at his feet, not speaking, simply looking. He worked on, writing, opening books, finding references, but distracted. He could see her out of the corner of his eye. He tried to ignore her. He had important work to do. But it didn't work. He kept glancing over.

Finally he turned. "Well, what is it? What do you want?"

"I don't want nuffin'," she said. "I'se only lookin' at you, and lovin' you."

What do you think happened next? You know, don't you.

Here you are, working away trying all your life to accomplish something, trying to be worthy. You keep glancing over your shoulder and God is there, looking. What does God want? What does God want of you? You work on harder and harder. Then God reaches out to you, looks you in the eyes, and says to you, "I don't want anything; I just want to love you."

What do you think happens next? What happens?

Grace to you. May God be better to you than you deserve.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, 1952, p. 885.

<sup>2</sup>Isaiah 55: 1.

<sup>3</sup>Isaiah 55: 5.

<sup>4</sup>Isaiah 40: 29, 31.

<sup>5</sup>Isaiah 55: 7.

<sup>6</sup>Luke 6: 35.

<sup>7</sup>Matthew 5: 45.

<sup>8</sup>Isaiah 55: 8, 9.

<sup>9</sup>Matthew 20: 1-16.