

Sermon: Garden Variety Grace

Year C, Proper 12

[Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15, \(16-19\); Luke 11:1-13](#)

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If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:13) We often talk about Jesus saying shocking things, things that woke people up then and now. And this is one of them. Jesus' whole journey to Jerusalem is spent preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God. If we who are evil and sinful and generally a mess can figure out how to give good gifts to our kids, imagine the gifts that God will give via the Holy Spirit. It's shocking how much more is possible than anything else we can come up with.

But for the people who first heard this story from Jesus, they were still getting over their first shock. Most of the folks who heard Jesus speak were poor, because most of the people in that era were poor. They were subsistence farmers, raising just enough to keep their families fed and their taxes paid. If you imagine their villages, there would be a collection of houses together and the fields would surround them. In the U.S. we have an image of a farm house standing alone, surrounded by its fields, and then another house. The people Jesus spoke with had houses clustered together. There was a communal oven in the town, where the women would take turns cooking their bread, and think pita bread, not baguettes. There would be a village well, where families would go to draw water for cooking or washing. Imagine 5 to 25 families living in very close quarters, so you knew who had baked bread that day, or who had a green thumb or who was fighting with their brother-in-law.

Families don't move from one village to another, in large part, because the land is not really for sale. It was given to the people of Israel by God, and God still owns the land. Oh, you can borrow against a future harvest and if you can't pay off the debt, you get tossed off the land. But you're not really selling the land. You're selling the right to be on the land and that was a sacred gift from God.

The houses themselves were small, usually a single room, made of some combination of wood and stone and clay/plaster/mud to hold it together. Then, as now, houses were places to hold your stuff, get out of the weather and keep away from predators when you slept. But they had a lot less stuff than we do. If you knocked on the door at midnight, the owner would be in bed with everyone else, because basically, the bed was a pile of bedding that got put onto the floor at night and rolled up out of the way at night. The bed was wall to wall, not because the bed was so big but because the house was so small.

And if you had someone turn up at midnight at your house, you need to offer them hospitality. You know perfectly well who baked bread that day and who had some extra food. And even if they grumbled, everyone in the town would help you make your guest welcome. Hospitality was the obligation of the whole town. Tonight you were the person with the unexpected guest. Next week, it could be the person whom you woke up. The village looked after each other because it was the only way to smooth out the highs and lows of misfortune. Not because you necessarily wanted to, but because that was the system. Everyone was one stroke of bad luck away from catastrophe.

So when Jesus said that the friend who had been woken up said *'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'* (Luke 11:7), it was shocking. Because no one would say that. Sure the friend might let you know that midnight was no time to come borrowing a loaf of bread or an egg or whatever. But no one in the village would say, "Do not bother me." A villager who took that approach would endanger the whole village.

What we don't hear in this story from Jesus and what all the folks in first century Palestine would hear is that the Romans were trying to break the tradition of relying on the village. The Romans had networks of financial and political obligations that connected one family to another. And they kept people in line, because those networks ran all the way up to the top of Roman society. Most people in the Roman empire were poor too. Just like the Israelites who listened to Jesus preaching, they were one stroke of bad luck away from calamity. But instead of relying on the village where they lived, they relied on the family networks they belonged to. As long as the inhabitants of Israel relied on each other, and not on the strength of the Roman noble families, they couldn't be completely controlled by Rome.

In this story, Jesus is definitely reminding his listeners of the shocking and beloved promise of the Kingdom of God. However much good we sinful and evil mortals can do for each other, God can and will do so much more. Just for the asking. But Jesus is also reminding them of the power and resources they have. Jesus is reminding them of the gift that God had already given them, the land and the land's ability to sustain them. Jesus is reminding them that they can resist the Romans, by doing what they have always done, relying on God's gift of the land and the shared resources of the village.

Jesus wakes his hearers up not at midnight with a knock at the door, but with the shocking reminder that the everyday life they are living is full of God's presence and full of the promise of the kingdom of God. But they can't see that because their everyday lives are full. Full of trying to stay one step ahead of disaster. So full that they don't see the elements of grace that sit in plain sight.

The people of Colossae appear to have forgotten that as well. They may be taken in by people who are leading them away from their lives in Christ. They appear to be in danger of being told how to live a good life based on what they eat and how the calendar comes together and how to properly keep Sabbath.

We can get that, because we hear that too. We hear of black men getting shot in traffic stops and police getting shot as they do their job. We hear of people being crushed to death as they celebrate the independence of their country. We hear of people being blown up as they visit the local market. And by the time we head downstairs for coffee hour, there will be some other tragedy of human making coming in our news feeds. Because we are evil, just like Jesus said.

But we are also capable of *giving good gifts to our children* (Luke 11:13). We are capable of *continuing to live our lives in Christ, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as we were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.* (Colossians 2:6-7). As flawed and broken as we are, we are capable of responding to the knock at midnight with due caution, but also with a loaf of bread and an egg. We are capable of listening to the political conventions this past week and next and participating in the political process without participating in their drama. We are capable of living in a world with terrorists and being frightened of what might happen to those we love and still remaining open to what the world offers us.

Two weeks ago I sat in the outfield at the Fire & Rescue Barbeque. There was a pretty good band from Milford, [21st and 1st](#), playing in the bandstand. The smoke from all the competitors was drifting up. Every now and again there was a nice breeze. The horseshoe pits were ringing like a whole choir of bells. The fireman's muster would have periods of great activity as teams competed to get into their turnout gear or rig up a hose the fastest or fill a raised barrel with canvas buckets. And then it would go quiet in the heat and humidity of the afternoon. Two of Brookline's cops walked through the crowd, talking with folks, shaking hands, stepping out of the way of an overthrown frisbee. In the very ordinariness of that day, there were so many abundant signs of God's grace, of our ability to live with each other as beloved neighbors. But we don't notice them. We just notice the struggle with the parking and the line for chicken.

We who are evil can give good gifts to our children. We can pack our kids into tighter and tighter circles with more and more barriers between them and world, knowing in our hearts that the world finds its way to them regardless. Or we can follow the path that Jesus laid out, that the people of Colossae followed, and we can rely on our village, however infuriating and in our business they may be at times. We can be shocked awake when we remember how many incredible gifts God has given us in our daily life that sometimes seems so full of evil and so empty of God's grace. We can take on the powers of this world that are trying to bring us into their inhuman systems that impoverish us even further. And we take them on by looking at our daily lives and seeing the grace God has put there.