

An Overflow of Grace

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 November 2012

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

- [0 : 0 0] Well, I want to add my welcome to you on this Artizo Sunday, a day that we are highlighting this ministry. It's appropriate that we're doing it today because it's a ministry that trains people and gives resources for ministry.
- And that reminds us that the church is about strengthening each other through God's word, through our relationships with one another, through our ministry to the other.
- We're training each other to love and serve Jesus better, as Mike was talking about in the children's focus. This is what our life together is about.
- It is a time of continuing training throughout our lives and education. And that's exactly what our Bible reading is about today. It's about Jesus training and educating his disciples for one purpose.
- It is so that they will be able to bring people to know God. That's his mission. Jesus wants the world to really know God, not just about God, but to know him as the living God that brings forgiveness into our lives, that changes us forever.
- [1 : 1 3] He brings his truth and his word, his purpose for our life into our hearts and into our minds. Who pours his deep love on us as our Heavenly Father continually, every day.
- But the amazing thing is, the striking thing about this passage is that we see that right from the start of Jesus' mission, he uses very imperfect people to carry out that mission.
- And he does infinitely more than people could ask or imagine in working through those people. And so I want to look at those imperfect disciples.
- I think you'll find that they're going to be a great encouragement to us in one way. There's something nice about seeing other people fail who are doing the same thing you're supposed to be doing. They are people who, the background of our passage today, they've been sent out two by two across the whole region.
- Jesus has given authority to cast out unclean spirits and that's what they've been doing. They've also been preaching a message of repentance. They've been healing people in Jesus' name as well as they anointed with oil.
- [2 : 2 6] They've done and said these amazing things in Jesus' name as they followed his instructions. And now they've come home.
- They've come back to Jesus and they are very, very tired. And some clergy can relate to that. You can imagine that they have really poured themselves out.
- And when they come back, Jesus says, you need a rest. Let's go in the boat. We'll go to someplace quiet and you can rest. And they're thinking, yes, yes. But the thing about Galilee is there are no secrets.
- And they all know the boat, which has logged many miles with Jesus. They know the disciples now pretty well and they follow them. They see where the boat's going and they, many people run, it says here in the Bible.
- And they beat the disciples and Jesus to the landing spot. And that brings us to verse 34. You can imagine the disciples' minds, what they're thinking as they see this massive crowd as they're landing to this great restful holiday they're going to have.

[3 : 39] They'll say, oh no, not more people. We need a break. And I think the clergy sometimes say that just before their holiday as well. But Jesus' reaction is very different in verse 34.

It's very important for us today. It's a key verse. When he went ashore, Jesus saw the great crowd and he had compassion on them. For they were like sheep without a shepherd.

That's a very important line. Because the great desire of the nation of Israel is that they would have a shepherd. And by shepherd, they understood somebody who was a strong man.

Who would lead them. Lead them into God's ways. Lead them into knowing God. So that their nation would be blessed. And right away when Israel was first in nation, Moses picked a successor.

Because as he said, I don't want you to be sheep without a shepherd. And so he chose Joshua. But over the history of Israel, there were very few good shepherds.

[4 : 44] The best one was David. And we know how he did not end well in his life. And in fact, things got so bad towards the end of the Old Testament in Ezekiel.

That Ezekiel said that shepherds became so bad they ruled the sheep harshly. They fed only themselves and they neglected the sheep who were scattered.

And so God in Ezekiel speaks. And he says, I am against those shepherds now. And he speaks these words directly to Israel and to us.

He says, behold, I, I myself, will search for my sheep and I will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flocks when he is coming among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep.

And I will rescue them. God will be the shepherd. And that's the longing of Israel. And on the day of our reading today, in a desolate place, Jesus fulfills that promise.

[5 : 50] He is God, the shepherd, who cares for his people. He loves them. And he feeds his sheep in a way that they have never, ever experienced.

Look at the end of verse 34. It shows Jesus' compassion. How does it work itself out? What does he first do to care for his sheep? He taught them many things.

He taught them. What he does is he feeds them with God's own words because he is God. He feeds them with God's truth, with his love, with his justice, and his power.

It is as though God himself is speaking to them because he is. He gives them a feast of God's truth so that they could know God and know what it means to have God as their shepherd.

It was an incredible day. Now, the deepest human desire is to know God. That's why Jesus has that as the purpose of his mission, to know God.

[6 : 55] The great philosopher, teacher of the church, influencer of the Western civilization, Augustine, often spoke about that deep human need to know God.

And he preached an amazing sermon called The Pure Love of God. And we have the words to the sermon. In that sermon, he asked his congregation to test themselves with a thought experiment.

And I want you to listen to what he said. And use that as your own thought experiment. It's very searching. He says this. Suppose God offered you anything and everything that you wanted.

Anything you can imagine. Nothing is forbidden. Nothing sinful. And nothing impossible. But he added one catch.

You will never see my face. Would you take that deal? Would you take that deal? It's a searching question, isn't it?

[8 : 01] It shows you what's in your heart. And if you know God, if you are a Christian, there is a horrifying feeling at that possibility of not seeing God's face ever, ever.

You shudder at the thought of the deal. And that's because at your deepest level, you want to know God. You want to see him. You want to worship him.

This is the longing that God has planted inside of you. And what that means is the greatest need and responsibility for God's people's leaders is that they will give true knowledge of God.

That can only come by his word. But the thing that we find in our life today, that was the same in Israel at this time, is that they often cannot hear it.

There is a famine of God's word, even in the church today. There's lots of really good information. And there are lots of good talks that are given.

[9 : 06] But they do not necessarily feed with the knowledge of God from the Bible. A feeding that feeds the soul, that satisfies the soul and brings life.

And this is what we need most of all as human beings. Probably the first reason, in fact, I know the first reason that David Short started our tribe, is so that God's people will be fed.

It was to address this famine that takes place even here in the Anglican church. How do we meet the needs of people so that they can feed liberally and in a satisfying way?

And this is what Jesus is about for his disciples. That this will happen for the world. Now, after this time, after this incredible time of feeding, Jesus' disciples get very alarmed as the sun is rapidly going down.

And it is a desolate place, and the modern translations say there is no Costco anywhere. How are you going to provide for 5,000 to 10,000 people or more? And they tell Jesus, you've got to send them away.

[10 : 20] Send them to farms and villages in the region and let them buy supper. It's a very reasonable request. It's what human possibility must say. But Jesus responds in a way that makes no sense.

And in the Bible, when you see things that seem to not make sense, that is something to really pay attention to. Because probably God is teaching us something very important.

He says to them, you give them something to eat. Well, you can imagine the double take that the disciples do. And the original emphasizes, you do it.

You do it. And they have a pretty quick response. And it's kind of rude. And it's kind of mocking. He says, sure, we'll go find eight months wages right now. And we'll go buy stuff and bring it back.

No problem. And that's the human possibility. There is no way. So why does Jesus push the disciples in that way? That's the question.

[11 : 22] It is because this will be the pattern for them and for the church, anybody who is part of Jesus' mission. This will be your pattern.

He will ask you. He will ask the church. He will ask the disciples to do things that seem very unlikely and impossible. To bring the knowledge of God into very difficult circumstances.

That's the nature of the mission. But he's showing us that every time that happens, it is an opportunity for you to entrust yourself to Jesus Christ.

To ask him to provide for his mission. To provide for what he is calling you to do. To make you adequate. To serve him. And as I was thinking and reading about this, and as we talked it over as a group of people on staff, there was a commentary, a very old one in 2 Corinthians.

It was very, very helpful that we came across. It says this. These words are really helpful. He said, The church is always in a crisis.

[12 : 59] Always will be. Difficulties. Limitations. Insoluble problems. Want of people and money. A menacing outlook. Endless misunderstandings and misrepresentations.

We have... That sounds a little bit familiar as well, too. We have not just to do our work in spite of these things. They are precisely the conditions requisite for doing it.

That's what Jesus is telling them. And he says, You feed them. You feed them. And there are really only two possibilities. Two ways to respond to the possible requests of Jesus.

The obstacles to mission. The first way is to focus on human inadequacy. To reject Jesus' direction. And to give up. And this is the response of the disciples.

Right away. They fail the task. But the second way is to accept the task. And that's what Jesus is calling for. To trust in the Son of God and depend on Him for what seems impossible.

[14 : 02] Now, the disciples actually do both of these things. They do mock Jesus. But because of Jesus' grace and His patience, He directs them anyway.

He directs them to do what He has told them to do. And He gives a spectacular visual lesson to them and to us. He sends them out into the crowd. And He finds out, Well, what have we got to work with here?

And they bring back two small fish and five loaves. Which is a way of saying, Beyond a shadow of doubt, There is nothing there. They were not prepared for a day out. It's an incredibly small amount.

And then Jesus says, Get all of the people out there into groups of hundreds and fifties. And that's why they knew that in the end there were 5,000 men. And probably that many more men, women, and children as well.

And Jesus, if you think of the scene, Jesus gives thanks to God, it says here, Like a Jewish father with a family. And He resides over a massive family banquet.

[15 : 05] Very different from Herod's banquet that we heard last week. Because His words don't bring death, they bring life. And He is serving the people that He is with, Not trying to impress them and gain power.

And He directs His disciples, After He gives thanks, To go serve. To serve the people, The bread and the fish. Hand out the bread and the fish.

And as Harry Robinson once said, Theologians have been having indigestion ever since. And the reason is, Because Mark's account says that All ate, And all were satisfied, As you would after a large meal.

And so since the 19th century, Theologians have tried to explain it away, So that it could make the Bible more palatable, To the modern way of thinking. And the way they did it, It shows an amazing creativity, It also shows that incredibly intelligent people Can completely lack common sense.

So they said things like this, It was a symbolic supper, So everybody got a little morsel of bread and fish, Kind of like communion. Now you can imagine what the children thought of that, They'd be clamoring and wanting more, And grabbing everybody else's.

[16 : 20] And the other thing is, Everybody, Mark said, Was satisfied. Or they said that there was an exaggerated number, It was more like 25 or 50. Well, how did you make that big mistake?

And the other thing that happened for Mark, Is that he talked about them being in groups of 50 and 100. Or here's one last creative one, This was a situation where everyone learned to share.

And sharing, everybody had enough. But Mark is clear that there's almost no food. He doesn't allow for any of these attempts to explain it away. And in fact, what he does at the end of this account, is he says that the disciples gathered up 12 good-sized baskets full.

Verse 43 and 44. And those who ate the loaves were 5,000 men. You cannot escape that Mark believes this is an extraordinary miracle.

Jesus is breaking the laws of physics. He is breaking the laws of the conservation of matter. There is more matter after supper in the universe than there was before. And those baskets of leftovers are very important for us.

[17 : 36] All four Gospels emphasize it. And it's important for Jesus' disciples because they teach that Jesus' grace is not just sufficient for the mission.

It actually overflows. It is lavish on this mission that will go into the world. Jesus is not only their friend who has a Galilean accent and who is sweaty and gets hot and tired and hungry.

He is also the Lord of the universe. And he provides for his people just like God provided for people in a different wilderness near Egypt all those years ago.

And not only does he provide abundant physical food, He so extravagantly gives the food of God's word that his voice gives eternal life, gives life.

What that teaches us this morning is that his ability and his power envelops our weakness and our inabilities.

[18 : 37] This is so important for us because you and I are each called to take our place in his mission. With all our weakness and with our failings.

And that's important because it's very easy for us to see the world, to see the mission, only from a human possibility point of view. And so from a human possibility point of view, we see a city of Vancouver very resistant to hearing the good news of Jesus.

It seems like very few actually want to know the living God. You may know friends and family and neighbors like this. But to walk in Jesus' way here is to pray that Jesus will bring people to know him through the ministries of St. John's, through your own life.

That we would pray that people in your life will come to know him because you stepped out in faith in the things that you say and in the things that you do. It is impossible from a world's point of view to serve Jesus in a financial advisory capacity.

How do I do that? You know, you can think of all the obstacles not to do it. You can think that how do I live in a way that Jesus wants me to live in my relationships.

[19 : 52] How do I live a pure sexual life in this world that says everything the opposite. It's impossible from a human point of view. Jesus' overflowing grace allows us to live for him, to live for his mission.

From a human perspective, we have St. John's financial challenge this year to meet our expenses. How can we do this? How is it possible from a human point of view?

Well, we pray that God will work through our own generosity. It is really, really good for us to be on our knees and to bring the needs of our church to him as people that are completely dependent upon him.

It is good for us. From a human perspective, our Tinslow students who we're talking about today, who love the Lord Jesus and want to serve him wherever the church is in the Anglican world, but there are very few paid positions in this missionary situation we find ourselves in the Anglican Network in Canada.

But God in his grace will bring growth as we pray to our missionary diocese so that it can flourish, so that they can shepherd God's people. A God in his grace, his overflowing grace can lead and bless creative ideas to begin new ministries.

[21 : 12] But you see how there is a need for us to rely upon that overflowing grace in order to carry out what Jesus calls us to. I thought there was a wonderful moment at the Synod, at the election of our new moderator of Annan.

Charlie Masters had just been elected and he said, well, do you have a few words to say? Which is a very difficult situation to be in. But what he said, he said these things, which I think is great for this Annan.

He said, in myself I can see only inadequacy for this role. But I know that Jesus makes me sufficient. That he will give what I need for this new work that he has given me to do.

That is the message that Jesus is teaching his disciples. It's the wonderful response to Jesus telling him, You feed them. You feed them. And Jesus' grace will overflow.

It overflows to the disciples who followed his instructions that day of his great banquet. And his grace overflows to you and to me. Now those disciples are a great encouragement to you and me, as I said at the beginning.

[22 : 26] Because they are clearly not up to the job. What we've seen at the end of this account is they do not recognize who Jesus is. Even after preaching and healing his name.

Their first response is to mock Jesus instead of trusting him with expectation. And I can relate to them in their failure and in my lack of ability.

And I see a few knowing nods and agreement of assent. This is one of those times where you don't want to ask for an amen. But it is true.

It is true for each of us. And it's very helpful for us to look at verses 45 to 52. Because you're going to see more of this in the disciples. And how Jesus works with them.

Jesus makes his disciples get back to the boat after this big day. And he says, You go up to the other side of the lake without me. And he then goes up on a mountain to pray.

[23 : 25] Now when Mark points out that Jesus is going somewhere to pray on a mountain. It is always at a time of crisis. There are just three times that it happens.

The first one was back in chapter 1. And the crisis was whether Jesus would be a miracle worker. Or whether he would preach the good news of the kingdom of Jesus coming. And the second crisis is at the end of the Gospel of Mark.

He's in the Garden of Gethsemane. And he prays, Lord, if it's your will, take this cup from me. But if not, I will go to the cross. Will the cup be passed?

Will he go to the cross? And of course, he goes to the cross having preached the good news of Jesus. For the salvation of the world. Those are incredible crises.

And this is important as well. Because the crisis here is will the disciples fail him? Is his training and teaching in vain? Will those imperfect men be able to carry on and one day feed his sheep?

[24 : 35] Does he throw his law in with them? Now, we don't exactly know what he prays. But it's very likely he prayed for guidance from the Father. And that he prays for his disciples as well.

In fact, as he prays, he sees them down in the lake really struggling to make headway against a strong wind. It's painful. They're rowing and they're working.

And you know, early Christians took this scene of Jesus praying to heart. They said, you know, we may not see Jesus, but he sees us when the wind and the waves are against us.

And we know from John 17 that he prays for us as he sees us. He prays for us. And what we see in those prayers, the result of them, is Jesus pour his extravagant grace on his disciples.

And what he does is he commits himself to them. He decides to wholeheartedly go with these disciples. And the mission of his would depend upon them.

[25 : 42] And in a literally unforgettable way, he shows how he is for them. So if you look at verse 48, Mark says that around 3 a.m., he comes to them walking on the sea.

Now the strange thing is that Mark also says at the end of verse 48 that he meant to pass by. Well, it's puzzling. Here's another thing that doesn't seem to make sense.

Here's another thing we have to really pay attention to. And it's important. Because in the Old Testament, when God reveals his glory to Moses and to Elijah, it is as though he passes by them.

Because they cannot stand his glory. He passes by them. And Job speaks of God as being one who alone treads on the waves of the sea.

And when he passes me, I cannot see him. When he goes by, I cannot perceive him. Well, Jesus takes the form of God in walking by them on the sea.

[26 : 41] And he is showing his disciples what people could never see in the Old Testament. Clearly revealing God himself. That this is who Jesus is.

The disciples, they respond in the way that we can expect. They don't get it. They think he's a ghost. And they start screaming.

And they scream until Jesus explains what they have just seen. And look at those words that he says to them. It's very important for us in verse 50.

He immediately spoke to them and said, Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid. And that word, that phrase, it is I, is full of meaning in the Old Testament.

God told Moses that his name is I am, or it is I. And God sent Moses to Pharaoh and said, Tell him that it is I, or I am, has sent you.

[27 : 44] And Jesus is saying, don't be afraid, because God is with you. I am here. And he got into the boat with them. And the wind ceased.

So how did his disciples respond to this incredible thing? Verse 51. They were utterly astounded, for they did not understand of the loaves.

But their hearts were hardened. These are the people that Jesus will work with. And for us, there is a wonderful warning and a marvelous encouragement as well here for us.

It's actually a very strong warning. Understand about the loaves. What Jesus says is don't miss the overflowing, extravagant grace of Jesus for you. Like the disciples, you can be with Jesus.

You can hear from Jesus. You can see him work powerfully. But your hearts can be hardened to him. In other words, you can lack faith in him. You can decide not to follow where he leads.

[28 : 49] And you can choose not to depend on him as your strength. And the one who gives you the ability to serve him. The biggest danger to taking part in his mission are not external dangers or a lack of ability.

It is that we might not embrace the overflowing grace of Jesus Christ in our lives. Because he has come into your boat. And he says, do not be afraid.

It is I. It is I, the shepherd. And this is our great hope. Here's where our great encouragement is from this. Jesus is the living God.

And his grace is sufficient for us even in our great weakness. His mercy is endless. You see that in these, in this relationship with the disciples. And the last four verses, 53 through 56, we see that this healing grace of God in Jesus overflows to people.

Even as they touch his clothes. And perhaps more amazingly, we see Jesus overflowing grace to take these disciples of hard hearts. And create a church that has taken the good news of Jesus.

[29 : 59] Now into all the ends of the earth. So in the context of your own life. Which with all of its imperfections.

In the context of this local church with all the typical flaws and weaknesses. In the context of a diocese that is a fledgling missionary diocese that is vulnerable. You and I have a mission.

It is Jesus' mission. To bring the personal living knowledge of God into people's lives in our church. And outside the church as well.

Like the disciples, Jesus is training you and me to do the impossible. To serve God in such a way that people will come to be satisfied in Jesus.

And this can only happen as Jesus the good shepherd feeds his sheep with the words of eternal life. That's how it happens. That's how it happens. So that if he is your shepherd, he has people in your life.

[31 : 00] Of whom he says to you, now you feed them. You feed them. As unlikely as that might seem to you, may you understand the loaves.

His overflowing, abundant grace is sufficient for you. Understand those loaves. Amen.