

*On the Side of Grace*

*Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

Lately I experience, and I hear reflected back to me from you in conversations, an overwhelming sense of lament. Events in the world, even on the evening news, are shared in such a way that they almost demand that we take a side. We find ourselves pressed to choose a rightness or a wrongness about a situation. Instead of acknowledging that there are merits and fallacies on both sides of a debate, we have polarized ourselves. We are all in or all out, 100% for or 100% against. We have lost sight of compromise and common ground. As Christians, we want to make loving, fruitful choices, but how can we when only two opposite and extreme paths are evident? Does God have a favorite side? How do we find our way to the *side* that is filled with God's grace?

In today's gospel message, in the mini-parable of the children, Jesus compares the discord of the crowd with the dissonance of children playing in a marketplace. The crowd has expectations. Yet the parallel ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus, in their very different approaches, are satisfying to no one. The children expect dancing, but John was stern and insisted on repentance and a dedicated life of sacrifice. The children shared their pain, but Jesus responded with joy and acceptance towards unsavory people like tax collectors and sinners. These two holy ones, both sent by God, act in very different ways, neither fulfilling the expectations of the people.

Our current modern lifestyle holds high regard for individual ruggedness and achievement. We convince ourselves we don't need God's help, or anyone else's, thank-you-very-much. We can handle it, whatever IT is, on our own. We convince ourselves we are wise and intelligent without God.

We are like the crowds. Trying to control and influence what is beyond our control. Categorizing and separating every element of life into such extreme dichotomies that there is little room left over for common ground, much less for common good. We have reduced everything to competition: my team must win at all costs. Which also means, the other team must lose. This is fine when it's the Lions versus the Bulldogs, but leads to big problems when it becomes the Hatfields vs the McCoys, Ft Worth vs Dallas, or blue vs red civic leadership. Then we have to ask ourselves: is winning and being in control really what wisdom and intelligence are all about? To the worldly, the answer is yes.

When Jesus says, "thank you, Father, for hiding these things from the wise and intelligent..." he is talking about the people who believe only in themselves to succeed.

The fiercely independent who rely on no one, the ones who deny that God, friends, family and community supported them along their life's journey.

By God's grace, the truth is revealed to infants.

Contemplate what it means to be an infant. The nature of infancy is a developmental stage of growing, learning and dependency. Infants depend on mother's milk, loving touch, arms to cradle them, care-givers to lift and carry, and parents to comfort. Infants live in a state of grace because they have no concept of what it means to be a self-made individual.

We arrive at the end of today's scripture, and a familiar verse used in memorial services. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Realize Jesus is speaking about the heart of life, not the end. Not rest that waits for us in heaven, but rest available to us now.

This is good news. Because people, I don't know about you, but I am worn out by political and social landmines we have planted for one another in our current cultural landscape. Carrying the burden of success alone for all the things that fall under my umbrella of responsibility is hard work. Constantly sorting everything into opposing categories is confusing. And here stands my Redeemer, offering life. Inviting me to discover an easier and lighter yoke. Welcoming me onto the path that is covered by grace, bound up in love from the Creator and supported by members of a loving community. A grace-filled, loving company of people who are working together towards a more loving gracious world. Not a homogenous white-washed world, but one where we co-exist and fuse the best ideas into solutions.

Neither side has a monopoly on God's grace. Like the crowd represented in the parable as children, we are reminded that God is beyond our control. God is the one who created us, not the other way around. God's grace goes with all of us, and will remain with us, giving us strength when we are on a fruitful path, and pulling us back when we wander off into the weeds. God's grace is with us until we learn, thankfully, that no one on either side is grace-less in the eyes of our Maker.