St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera QLD

28th June 2026 – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 10:40-42

A CUP OF GRACE

Perhaps you've heard of the concept of a mystery shopper, or an undercover shopper. There are a number of different variations of how this works, and the terms are used in a few different ways, but the one which comes to my mind is that a business hires a company to send people into its shops and then report back on the kind of customer service they receive. And sometimes, just to really test staff out, the undercover shopper might take on the role of a difficult customer to evaluate how staff deal with that. It's one of those things that we could say that on the one hand, from the staff point of view, it's a bit sneaky and underhanded. But on the other hand, from the view of the business, they want to know how customers feel when dealing with them so that they can improve on what is the main factor behind their success or failure; customer satisfaction. And I guess, knowing that the customer who is really cheesing you off right now could be reporting back to the boss is possibly a strong motivating factor for staff to remain calm and patient, but it's probably a motivation based on fear of getting in trouble over their performance.

A number of years ago a pastor friend of mine when moving to a new parish wanted to be able to check out the town and church before he was officially welcomed there. So, he told the parish he would be arriving in town a few days later than he actually did, booked into a motel, and spent a couple of days wandering around the town which would be his new home. And then, he went to church on Sunday with nobody knowing at first that this stranger among them was their new pastor; he didn't hide that fact, but he didn't rock up saying, 'hi, I'm the new pastor', they had to talk to him to find that out. He was an undercover church attender. He did this not so he could base his first sermon on a critique of the kind of welcome he received, who did well in welcoming the stranger and who didn't, but so that he had an idea of how someone new feels walking into that church building, that worship service, that Christian community. In a way it would be good to be able to do that in our community here. We have lots of new people coming along to join us here, and while we can reflect on what we think is working well and what needs improvement, we always have our own biases, preferences and experiences which cloud our evaluation of

that. While we are not, like the staff worried about an undercover shopper, acting out of fear of keeping our jobs, how do we see new people who come along to join us, how do we relate to them, how do we accept them? As our reading here says; do we see Jesus in each one of them?

Over the last couple of weeks, in looking at readings from Romans, we've been talking about and reflecting on God's grace to us in our lives; what it means to us, how it changes our relationship with God, what affect it has on who we are, how it changes our relationship with others. This 'grace' is the free gift of God's love and forgiveness to us; freely given not because of anything we have done or can do but paid in full for us in Jesus' death on the cross. All we can now do is to receive it in faith. And it's important, in understanding what Jesus says in our reading today in the context of the whole Bible, to put these words under this grace of God. In His teaching to the disciples here, Jesus encourages them, and us as His disciples today, to welcome and assist both those who come in His name, and, actually, anyone, as if we were welcoming Him. It has echoes of Matthew 25 when Jesus says, "When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me, and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me." *(Matt. 25:35-36 CEV)*

So, putting the words of Jesus here into the context of grace, the 'reward' we receive isn't because of what we do, but because of what God in Jesus has done for us. In that way don't look at it as a legalistic 'you must do this or else' which can weigh us down. Or a pietistic, 'look at me doing this so much better than those people over there, God's certainly going to reward me better than them', to make it all about us and what we do. Jesus' words here aren't to scare us into responding out of fear, or to entice us into acting out of desire for reward, but instead to lead us into reaching out in grace by the grace we are already given. All of the things Jesus talks about here are the response to living in and living out the love and grace God shows to us.

There is a really great example of what this means at the end of this reading, and it's easily overlooked. This also gives us our theme for today. After talking about welcoming all of those different people, to give a practical example of what this looks like Jesus says, 'anyone who gives one of my most

humble followers a cup of cool water, just because that person is my follower, will be rewarded.' (v. 42) A simple act to a humble person. We might think there's not much to a cup of cool water, but put into the context of those who first heard these words. In their dry land a cup of water itself would not have been as always readily available as it is for us today, and for that water to be cool would be very special indeed. Picture someone coming to you after a long journey, and even though you don't know them you give them what they probably desire more than anything else; a cup of cold water. It's not a big act, it's not a spectacular act, but what they receive is far more than what you are giving. We serve God in serving others, no matter how small those acts of service might seem to us.

We drink from the Cup of Grace, we share the Cup of Grace. How do we this? In ways that we talk about a lot, but reflect on them now as we go through them. In reflecting on how God welcomes us into our relationship with Him, how do we go in 'welcoming' others in the same way; to love as we are loved. To forgive as we are forgiven. To serve as we are served. To accept as we are accepted. How do we go in sharing the Cup of Grace we drink from, in all of these ways, with our family? Our friends? Our colleagues? Our church family? Everyone we come into contact with? How do we do that, in both the big ways and the small? We know how good it is to drink from this cup, to live in God's love, to live in God's forgiveness, to be a part of a community which knows and shares these things. Our call, as Jesus disciples, is to give people who are thirsting this same cup to drink from.

To go on with this theme of grace being like water we drink from, about three years ago I introduced this picture of our church community at St. Andrews as being like an Oasis of Grace; a place where those who are searching and thirsting can come to drink the sweet waters of God's love and grace (the concept came from things I had heard from two other pastors). Looking back on that now, especially in the light of what has happened and is happening in our congregation, it's interesting to reflect on how we are being this Oasis for people – if you're not from St. Andrews perhaps you can apply this to your own church family also. The underlying thought behind this image, as we have been looking at this week and over the past few weeks, is that the experience of grace changes us. And then, a community which is made up of people who are transformed by grace is one which is: Thankful; Welcoming; Not ruled by law; At peace with God's plan for its future; Not Program-driven; Loving; Does life together; Continually surprised by grace;

Forgiven; A community in which grace is proclaimed. Just like in our lives we don't always respond to, live out, and share God's grace perfectly, neither do we in our church family. But, and I do certainly have a strong bias in this, looking at this picture I see many examples of how God's grace is at work among us in these ways; when we as a community of grace can give people that cup of grace which they come to us for. Where do you see your role in our community coming out here? How do you think we are going? How do you think we could be going better? Most importantly, what examples of God's grace at work in and among us do you see here that we can be thankful for?

A cup of cool water, a Cup of Grace. We are called to pass on what we have received; God's free gift of love and grace in our lives. In doing so, we don't act out of fear, or a desire to make ourselves better than others, but in loving gratitude and thanks for what we have already been given. We don't need an undercover shopper, or even an undercover church attender, to encourage us to do that, but simply to remember and respond to what God gives to us. In a world of people who, as there always have been, are lost, wandering, hurt, and in need of that, 'cup of cool water', God by His grace guide and lead us to be that Oasis which can bring His grace into their lives. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Have you ever had the opportunity to be an undercover shopper/church attender/diner, ie, to anonymously check out what it is like to go to a place which you would later be a part of? Did you find this opportunity helped you in how you later treated others who came to this place?
- Reflect on what God's grace means to you in your life: What does it bring to you? How does it change His relationship with you? How does it change you?
- In what ways is God calling you to give a 'cup of cool water'/Cup of Grace to people? What opportunities are before you? Remember to also look for the small and everyday ways we can do this.
- How does the Christian community you are a part of go in being an Oasis of Grace? What role do you have in that community being a place where thirsty people can come to drink from God's grace? If there are ways your community could be sharing God's grace more in how they reach out to others, how are you called to be a part of this?
- If there are any ways you struggle with either knowing God's grace yourself, being transformed by God's grace, or sharing this Cup of Grace with others, bring these to God in prayer.

Pray: thank God that we live in His love and grace in our lives each day. As we drink from the Cup of Grace, ask Him to help us be a part of leading others to drink from this cup also.

Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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