

Sermon

Sunday, July 21, 2019

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ 1 Samuel 24:8-12, Matthew 5:43-48

Mind the Gap

The Rev. Al Zadig, Jr.

Way back in 1968, one unforgettable phrase was recorded and is now repeated every time a British subway car opens its doors. You may know the phrase I'm talking about. The subway pulls up, doors open and you hear that Britishism: MIND THE GAP. The phrase has gone viral over the years, but was coined to warn passengers that some platforms on the London Underground are curved, while the subway cars are straight, producing that unsafe gap to step over. While there's certainly a physical truth to Mind the Gap, I believe there is also a spiritual truth to mind the gap. Whether we've been a Christian all our life, or are brand new to the faith, or haven't made any commitment to Jesus Christ, the one thing we all deal with is that gap between what we believe and what we actually do. For instance, we may believe in forgiveness, but it is possible to believe it and not practice it. The gap between can be massive. I remember in seminary one of my classmates saying about another, "After what he did, I could never forgive him!" My mind began to race; if Christians can't forgive, who can!

Today I want to take you into an amazing story in 1st Samuel, involving David and his relationships with Goliath and King Saul. Specifically, what David believed and what he did concerning justice, mercy, and grace. Let me define these potential gaps. Justice is getting what you deserve. Mercy is NOT getting what you deserve. And grace is getting what you don't deserve. Let me say that again. Justice is getting what you deserve, i.e., a criminal gets life in prison. Mercy is NOT getting what you deserve, when a criminal is given a lighter sentence. And grace is getting what you Don't deserve – our criminal receives a presidential pardon.

With those definitions in mind, David knew justice needed to be served with the bully Goliath. The other Jewish fighters believed there needed to be justice, but had no courage to take Goliath on - big gap. Not so with David. With one rock, David brings justice. No Gap between what he believed and what he did. Justice is served!

I remember so well as a child listening to every Boston Celtics Basketball game on radio, with that gravelly announcer Johnny Most as their play by play announcer. You could tell he went through nine packs of cigarettes a day. But every time a Celtics player was fouled and a free throw shot was made, Johnny would yell, "Justice is served!" Goliath and the Philistines get what they deserve!

Of course, at this point, David is just a young red-headed shepherd but the King of Israel, King Saul is amazed. King Saul at first is absolutely proud of this young man David, until he begins hearing the chants in the public square. People with tambourines, singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, David his TENS of thousands!" And Saul's heart begins to go dark in jealousy and rage against David. In fact, eleven times over the next several chapters Saul tries to kill David, but each time the hand of the Lord saves David.

Yet David is on the run. And this is tragic because young David loved King Saul. Not only loved him but knew that God had chosen Saul to be King and David refused to go against God's will to kill him. Nonetheless, for several chapters, David is hiding from his jealous angry mentor.

But It all comes to a head in Chapter 24 when Saul, with 3,000 soldiers, pursues David and his men into the Desert of Maon near today's Dead Sea. David and his men break off into the mountainous rocks of En-Gedi, an area filled with huge caves used for housing as well as deep tombs for burial. Spies tell Saul that David is in the caves, and somehow Saul gets to the mouth of the exact Cave where David is hiding. David freezes in the shadows. Saul can't see him, and wondering what to do next, the Bible says Saul decides it would be a good place for a potty break. Saul turns his back on the cave and goes to the bathroom. As he's going, David's advisors whisper, "Now's the time, kill him!" Instead, David on his hands and knees, creeps up and cuts off a corner of Saul's robe. Why? To prove a bit later that he could have killed King Saul but chose not to.

And that takes us to the reading we heard just now. Saul turns around and begins to leave when David stands up, dangles part of King Saul's robe fragment and says, "My Lord the King! Why are you trying to kill me? I could have killed you just now but did not because you are the Lord's anointed! I will not touch you!" It's fascinating that King Saul replies by weeping, saying you are a better man than I.

My friends, this chasing game, and David's refusal to kill King Saul, is one of the most breathtaking displays of God's justice, mercy, and grace in the Old Testament! Unlike Goliath, David knows he was not to kill Saul, that God Himself would handle the judgement of Saul. Which teaches us there are sometimes when justice demands we leave revenge to God. David knows it's up to God in this case to take justice, which means he does not take Saul's life. No gap between what he believed and what he did.

David grants mercy; he does not give King Saul what was deserved. And grace. David gives Saul what he didn't deserve - continued life! No Gap. Saul didn't deserve the life and the kindness of David, but here's something about grace you may never have known. Grace is never giving what is deserved. True grace is giving what is truly needed. David gave King Saul what he truly needed: life and the opportunity for a redeemed relationship.

Yet, there's only one catch with grace. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can only be yours if you take it. Sadly, Saul did not. While he left with peace, he would try unsuccessfully to take David's life again days later. Now we know that David was far from perfect, yet there wasn't much of a gap between what David believed and what he did concerning justice, mercy, and grace.

I think of Fiorello H. LaGuardia, a modern-day David in some ways. The tiny 5 foot 2 man was known as "Little Flower" and of course has an airport in New York named for him. LaGuardia was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression. His father was a lapsed Catholic, his mother a Jew, but LaGuardia was a follower of Jesus and attended

Christ Church in New York. In fact for many years of his life, he was Senior Warden and served on vestry. He was legendary. He would ride with New York City fire fighters. He took entire orphanages to baseball games. And my father, who grew up on New York City, told me recently that when the New York newspapers were on strike, He remembers LaGuardia going on radio to read the Sunday comics to the children! But on one bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turns up at a night court that served the poorest of the city. LaGuardia dismisses the judge for the evening and takes over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman is brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She tells LaGuardia her daughter's husband had deserted her and her two grandchildren were starving. The shopkeeper involved refused to drop the charges. LaGuardia turns to the woman and says, "Justice must be served. Ten dollars or ten days in jail." But as he pronounces the sentence, and in a breathtaking display of justice, mercy, and grace, LaGuardia reaches into his pocket for his own ten-dollar bill to pay the fine. He then says, "As I pay your fine, I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." \$47.50 of grace-filled money was given to the bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread. Shortly after, the red-faced grocery store owner, petty criminals, and policemen, who had all just paid 50 cents each, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

Justice-Mercy-Grace...

This is what Jesus did. Yes, 490 years after David, in fact David's great grandson 14 generations later. Jesus gives ultimate Justice by taking our sin upon Himself and dying for us. He pays our fine with His life on the cross! That cross is the place of ultimate justice and mercy., and breathtaking grace. Jesus out of unconditional love, giving not what we deserve, but what we need! Giving us forgiveness, love, healing, and eternal life. In Matthew 5, Jesus says, "You've heard it said, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. No, no, no, I say the opposite, live the justice, mercy and grace I died to give you. Based on what I've done for you, turn around and leave the justice part up to me. Live mercy. Live a life of grace. If you just love the ones that love you, that's boring! Win the world to me by being different!"

Jesus taught that it's more important to give mercy and grace than to receive it, even to our enemies! You see, as David discovered, as the gap was erased between what David believed and what he did, David discovered , at this point of his life, a life of integrity. Integrity is formed when the gap between what we believe and what we do is closed.

However, we can't do this on our own. Living out these three words of justice, mercy, and grace cannot be done. It's not in us to turn the other cheek. It's not in us to withhold what people really deserve. It's not in us to give people what they really need, unless we receive that gift of grace from Jesus. I don't think you and I can fill that gap between what we believe and what we do. I believe filling the gap requires us to get on knees praying. "Jesus, I accept your gift of grace. Help me show love to those for whom I don't feel the love! Help me close the Gap Lord. Help me show mercy and grace to the un-merciful and un-graceful."

You see, my friends, loving our enemies, showing mercy and giving grace is one of the only proofs that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives. It's all about Him. It's actually one of the only ways the world will know we are Christ followers. It's why we are baptizing Marley Drayton today, to say through the Holy Spirit, be different Marley, show the Sauls of your world the power of Jesus. Live differently through the Holy Spirit in Baptism!

My friends, let me make this personal. I have failed over and over in this department. There have been times in my life when the gap between what I believed about justice, mercy and grace and what I've done have been 100 miles apart. Times especially in my family where I have forced justice, withheld mercy, and held back grace. Why? Because it feels better, it's easier, yet kills our souls and destroys our witness. It's in those grace-less moments I've had to once again accept the grace of Jesus - that he loves us unconditionally and that he's offering us the gift of Himself! The grace gift can only be ours if we receive it. We can't give what we haven't received first. So, my friends, who are the Goliaths and Sauls in your life? Who in your life needs justice? Who in your life needs mercy? Who in your life needs grace? Who have you been withholding mercy from, thinking you were accomplishing justice? From whom have you been holding back grace, thinking you were giving them what they deserved?

Mind the gap, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, lay down every obstacle to justice, mercy and grace. Lay it down. And in so doing, prove to the world Jesus is Lord of your life.