

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45  
Matthew 20:1-16

### **GRACIOUS BEYOND MEASURE**

Several years ago Duke's John Westerhoff was called in to consult about problems encountered by government teachers at a school for Native Americans out west somewhere. One of the teachers told him that she was shocked by the lack of morals among the Native American children. "They cheat constantly," she said. "We can't make them stop."

When Dr. Westerhoff interviewed the children and asked them why they all looked on each other's papers during the tests, they told him, "If someone in the tribe knows the answers, he should tell everyone who doesn't know it. If someone in the tribe does not know, he should go and ask someone who knows." Dr. Westerhoff realized that he was in a culture with a very different orientation than his own. What we have been taught to call cheating, the Native American children called cooperation.

That story got me thinking about how, in my past, different groups had different values, and sometimes, "ne'er the twain shall meet." I remember finishing seminary and going to my first church; it became apparent that certain things our seminary professors taught and valued weren't always attuned to the local church's life. I left my first church, which was in a small town where I knew most of the people and waved to everyone, and moved to a larger community. There, when I waved to people I didn't know, I received some hard and suspicious stares in return.

When I went to my third church in Richmond, the first Sunday morning I was on the job, I met an older woman in the church. She asked me, "Aren't you our new associate pastor?" I replied, "Yes, ma'am." "Didn't I read in the church newsletter that you came from Texas?" "Yes, ma'am, I sure did." And she said with great enthusiasm, "Oh, a good Southern boy!"

With a twinkle in my eye, I told her, “I lived in Texas for the past twenty-one years, going to seminary and serving my first two churches there. But, I was born and raised in St. Louis, MO for the first twenty-two years of my life.” Her face literally dropped and she said, “Oh well, it’s good to have you here anyway.” With that, she turned and walked away. I thought to myself, “Lord, where have you sent me? I had to drive north and east from Texas to get to Richmond, and now that I’m here, I find that I’m a whole lot farther south than ever before!”

Those stories help to prepare us for what’s coming next as we listen to today’s gospel lesson in which Jesus told a parable about a landowner and some laborers whom he hired throughout the day to go work in his vineyard. As you hear this story, keep in mind that the values within the kingdom of God are oft times vastly different from the standards by which the world operates. **Listen to the reading of God’s holy Word from Matthew 20:1-16.**

At first, this story that Jesus told reads like a fifth grade math problem. A man owned a vineyard and it was time to harvest the grapes. He went out at 6:00 a.m. and hired some folks to work all day long at the rate of a dollar an hour. He went out again and again - at 9:00 a.m., noon, 3:00 p.m., and finally at 5:00 p.m. - and he hired more workers at a dollar an hour. At 6:00 p.m., which was quitting time, he told the foreman to line everyone up, beginning with the last ones hired and ending with those who worked all day, and pay them their wages. How much money would the various work crews make at the end of the day? Do the math.

Now, we would expect that those who hired on at 5:00 p.m., would receive a dollar; those who came to work at 3:00 p.m. would get three dollars; the noon crowd would receive six dollars; the 9:00 a.m. workers would get nine dollars; and those who hired on first thing in the morning would receive twelve dollars for a full day’s work.

But, it didn't happen like that at all! Those, who hired on at 5:00 p.m. and worked only one hour, received a full day's work wage of twelve dollars each! We can imagine the sheer delight of the other workers in line as they did their mental calculations. "If those folks, who worked just one hour, got twelve dollars, and I worked three hours, then I'm going to earn thirty-six dollars!" The noon laborers thought they would be pocketing seventy-two crisp one dollar bills; and, the twelve hour work crew couldn't wait to get their hands on \$144.00!

However, once again, it didn't happen like that at all. As each person stepped forward, each one received his or her twelve dollars. No matter how little or how long each one worked in the vineyard, they all received the same amount of money. Naturally, those, who had worked the longest, griped the loudest. They complained to the owner of the vineyard that it wasn't fair that those who only worked one hour received the same pay as them; after all, they had worked all day long in the scorching heat. They wanted to know what in the world the owner was thinking. He couldn't run a business that way. It just wasn't fair! And, we have to admit that they have a point. Why, if we had answered the math problem the same way in which the owner paid the various group of workers, we would have gotten points taken off on the test!

Then, when we hear the owner's response, we remember that Jesus is always trying to help us understand that the values of the kingdom of God are not the same standards that operate in the work place or in the world. In response to their protest of unfair labor practices, the owner told the twelve hour shift of workers: "I didn't wrong you at all. You agreed to work for me at a dollar an hour, and you received twelve dollars for working all day. You were paid the right amount of money. If I decided to give to these other workers, who came last, the same amount of money, can't I do what I want? After all, it's my money. Are you going to get stingy

because I am generous?" He had them there, but I imagine they still grumbled loudly on their way home.

That's the story Jesus told his disciples. Don't try this method on a math problem or in your business; if you do, you will fail miserably. But, remember, Jesus is talking and he's trying to get the point across that "the kingdom of heaven is like" this owner of a vineyard, who hires different people at different times throughout the work day, and then gives them the same amount of money - no matter how much they worked. It also helps to remember what the Lord God proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9).

The point is this: God isn't concerned about being fair with each and every last one of us. God is more concerned with being gracious beyond measure toward all of us. God isn't interested in knowing how to run a business or solve a math problem by the world's way of reckoning. God isn't concerned with who is deserving and who is not. God wants, instead, to gather in all of God's children and love us all – not equally – but extravagantly! You see, God can't parcel out divine love. God is unable to give only a twelfth, a quarter, a half, or three-quarters of holy love to a person. No, God only knows how to be God and that means loving us with all the love at God's disposal. God is gracious beyond measure, and God only knows how to give in abundance to every last one of us!

Jesus told this parable with the ending, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last," because Peter had just asked Jesus what he and the other disciples could expect in the way of reward for their loyalty to Jesus. After all, they had given up everything to follow him. They probably figured that their reward would be great since they had followed the Master the longest.

But Jesus wanted them to think outside of the box as to what's fair and how the grace and mercy of God far exceed our sense of merit and reward.

Jesus could be reminding his disciples (and certainly the scribes and Pharisees) that, even though tax collectors and sinners come to God late in life, at least they come, and God loves and welcomes them no less than God loves these first disciples. Or, Matthew could be thinking of the Jewish Christians in his congregation, who might be tempted to resent the influx of Gentiles into the church; these former pagans are loved equally and extravagantly by God as well!

And, I think Jesus is also reminding us – whether we realize it or not – that we too are latecomers within the kingdom whom God also loves beyond measure. We are more like the eleventh hour workers than those who worked all day. It is only through God's grace that we receive all that God has prepared for us in this life and the next. We can all receive God's grace, but none of us deserves it. While sometimes in life this may seem unfair, if grace were fair, it wouldn't be grace.

I want to close with this story told by the Rev. Randy Ehrhardt. While I was in seminary, I worked as a volunteer chaplain in a local hospital. There was one grouchy old man named Red, who had smoked since he was 12 years old. It was hard to understand his gruff and weakened voice, especially with the oxygen tube that wrapped around his ears and went in his nose. I visited him several times. I never did see another visitor in Red's room. He and his wife were never able to have children and she had passed away several years ago. He told me he had outlived all his family and friends.

I would always finish my day visiting Red. I would pull up a chair, and he would perk up in bed and begin telling me all kinds of stories. One day when I entered the room, it was obvious things had changed. The room seemed gloomier, the curtains had been kept closed, and there

was that antiseptic hospital smell. I did most of the talking. The time was near and there were still no visitors. I thought at least maybe his minister would stop by. I asked Red why he never told me any stories about church, and he said he had never gone. *Red, how come you never went to church?* And his eyes said it all. *Because you never asked me.*

I knew Red was thinking of more people than just me. But he was right. I just assumed Red belonged to a church. He was 95 years old. Surely someone in his life had told him about Christ. That afternoon Red accepted Jesus Christ into his life and shared communion for the first time. Red said he felt a peace he had never experienced before. I read some scripture and had a prayer. Red was so appreciative and thanked me over and over. The next day, Red died.

In his short time as a Christian, Red reminded me of something that sadly I had forgotten. When you have been a Christian for a long time, it is easy to take your faith for granted. It doesn't matter if you come to Christ as a small child or on your deathbed, it doesn't matter if you are a long time disciple or a penitent thief on the cross, God's grace in all of its fullness is offered for you.

Red's funeral was two days later. At the cemetery were two cousins, a neighbor, a minister who had obviously never met Red, and me. After a very short service, the minister ended his remarks with "*Well done, good and faithful servant, well done.*" Then, Randy Ehrhardt ends the story with his own words, Thank God, grace isn't fair.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard that Jesus told is a very strange story, to be sure. But, thank God, because it is also the gospel truth concerning the Lord our God, who is gracious beyond measure, who does not give to us based on conventional standards and expectations but out of the abundant and eternal goodness that God gives to all. Amen.

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