

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
 September 24, 2017, Matthew 20:1-16; Jonah 3:10 – 4:11, 20A  
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

If our gospel lesson sounds familiar to you this morning – it is. We read it a couple weeks ago as part of our dedication to our service ministry but it wasn't the text of our meditation that day. And at fellowship hour, a couple of you came to me after hearing it and shared your questions, your discomfort with this parable. So, today we will reflect on this one – where do we start? At first glance it's absolutely outrageous.

This gospel lesson is hard for those of us who are concerned about fairness. It seems to tell us that God is not fair: the story is simple. Jesus describes a hiring process. Some workers are hired early, some at mid-day, some in the afternoon, and some just before quitting time. At the end of the day, they were all paid the same wage.

Those who had worked all day felt they should be paid more than those who had worked only part of the day. But the employer said, "You all agreed to the wage when you signed on," and more significantly, "It's my money and if I want to pay everyone the same thing, I can."

We can empathize with those laborers who had worked all day in the vineyard under the hot sun. Was it fair that they received the same amount of pay as those who had worked one hour? Obviously not!

And so they grumbled. And if we are honest with ourselves, we will have to admit that we would have grumbled too. Maybe we have done so in similar circumstances.

Maybe these feelings have also carried over into our relationship with God. It seems that this was happening with Jonah in today's Old Testament reading. God had sent Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh what would happen if they didn't mend their ways. You may remember that Jonah went to some lengths to avoid doing this, but finally did as God had commanded. And now look what happened! Darned if those people in Nineveh didn't repent! Of course, that was the whole point of the message God had asked Jonah to deliver, but apparently Jonah was looking forward to seeing "those bad guys get theirs." He sounds downright accusing when he says, "I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

Have you ever known anyone that you would like to see get the punishment he or she so richly deserved? Perhaps there are moments when we wish God wouldn't be quite so merciful! To others, that is.

This story of the vineyard workers pushes all sorts of buttons, doesn't it. It's a challenge to assumptions we all have: the value of hard work, the value of fair play, the concept of reward for work done. It goes against our sense of justice – we feel for the grumbling workers – employers can be unfair but how can God be so unfair? Our sense of fairness is deeply ingrained, isn't it. Fairness is the highest ethical stance of many in our culture. Some would even choose fairness over lavish love.

Well, this parable, difficult as it is, is about God. It's about grace. God's lavish grace, God's lavish love is open to all – at any time! At the dawn. At the dusk. It's never too late.

Grace: the mercy of God shown in countless ways to undeserving people: that's hard for us to hear.

But here's the deal, though: from this parable we learn that God is not fair – at least according to standards we live by. Rather than being fair, God is lavish. Divine grace doesn't rest on any merit system we know. Divine grace is a great equalizer – it rips away presumed privilege – it puts all recipients on a level playing field.

Let's look at when problem starts with the workers. It starts when they compare their rewards, when they become envious of the generosity shown to the others. They're not really against grace – they're against grace shown to others – according to their sense of fairness. It's all very well to smile and feel good when grace touches our lives, when grace gives us what we want. But what about when that same amazing gift of grace falls on someone else and it doesn't fit in our own merit system?

It's hard to stomach when we realize that those who are guilty of wrongs we have long opposed: maybe racism, sexism, murder, abuse of spouse or child, cheating, lying – it's hard to stomach the idea that these people, too, are our brothers and sisters to whom divine generosity, divine grace, has also been given. If we believe that grace is a free gift to be but received, this is hard. But grace is anything but sweet and sentimental – it's radical.

If we think of the workers who had been in the vineyard from dawn to dusk at the “insiders” and those late comers as the “outsiders” we get another clue. The insiders come with expectations, with assumptions about process, about the outcome of the day's work. And then here come the outsiders, and what happens? All those expectations are shattered – the insiders are frustrated, confused, maybe a little angry, crying out this isn't fair!

You know, I wonder if there's an implication here for the gathered community, the church.

There have been some first class church fights grounded in unfairness. Sometimes it is a group of spiritually aware folk trying to guide the life of a congregation in a more “holy” way. And they are not treated fairly in the decision making. Sometimes it is a group of long time church members who have labored long for the sake of the congregation and they are excluded from decisions about congregational life by a newer group of members.

A continuing challenge for most churches, including ours, is how do we grow, how do we go about getting more volunteers for our activities, our ministries. We have a rich and vital history here – but we all know the world has forever changed. Here and in other churches the way we do ministry has to adapt as well – our basic message certainly is timeless – our call to love God and our neighbors hasn't changed – but the way we respond does.

Do we have an insider/outsider challenge here?

Are there unconscious assumptions, expectations, that get in our way? That get in our way of being a welcoming community to all our members, both long standing and new? How do we recognize those things?

And then, how do we recruit, evangelize if you will? Do we, like the vineyard owner go out and ask, give a welcome, over and over again? Do we meet people where they are and call out their gifts and talents?

How do we magnify the call so it's louder for those with perhaps different assumptions and expectations, or to those who are hesitant to participate, perhaps in the fellowship hour, those who are single, who come from a different religious background, who may be shyer than we are. Who come with pain and anxiety that we don't know about? And then, how do we encourage and empower these seemingly "outsiders" to live out their God given calls? I wonder.

When we are preoccupied with what seems fair, maybe we lose touch with the sense of grace, not the sweet, permissive grace, but the radical grace we see here in the parable of the vineyard. When life is reduced to "we've always done it this way" or "we've never done it this way" our vision narrows. We forget that our God has extended lavish generosity and love to us. Maybe knowing ourselves as receivers of astonishing mercy, amazing grace, is what opens our hearts and minds and hands to others. And the operative word here is "ourselves" not "me."

Divine grace doesn't rest on the merit system – God's criteria is such that we just can't comprehend it. We can't control God. How often do we all try to see, to make God in our own image, rather than seeing ourselves, our brothers and sisters as created in God's image.

This parable is about the righteousness of God: the fact that God sees and acknowledges the good works that people do. But that righteousness, that feeling of righteousness is lost when people claim that reward, that acknowledgement, as a right; when they compare their own performance with that of others instead of concentrating on the goodness of God. The reality is, it doesn't matter how long a person has worked. It only matters that he or she was called and that the call was heeded.

God's generosity is God's to give. We who worship such a God are called to imitate that generosity, not begrudge it. Easier said than done, isn't it.

And this parable is a warning: it's a warning about "grumbling", about taking on a attitude of disdain or dismissiveness, of being slow to forgive members of the community. It's a warning – not a condemnation – but a warning against expectations because they are shattered in this story! For the workers in the story, for us as we try to deal with this difficult text. For us as we try to relate this story to our everyday lives. It's hard, isn't it.

God's not unfair. God is lavish! God doesn't keep score. God doesn't look to the bottom line. God is calling us to ministry. God is still speaking.

Can we let go of the merit system we've come to expect? Can we let go of our tendency to judge our brothers and sisters, and move toward a new compassion, a new openness, and most important of all, put our center on God? God looks with compassion on all of us. All of us. Can we strive to do anything less? It's not easy – it's radical. It's countercultural.

And these days, we are called to be as countercultural as we possibly can be – we are hungry for good news, for compassion, for God's love – all of us, insiders and outsiders.

What would be the results if we made ourselves available to be the instruments of God's love to all children of God, not worrying about what they did or did not deserve?

What if we would pray that for clarity to see how God wants to use us, and would listen, and then would act. We can be a beacon of light in a hurting and frightened world! We can offer extravagant hospitality where it's so desperately needed.

And, you know what?

That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. We can do this! We can do this together. Amen.