

## Generous Grace

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Matthew 20:1-16

Psalm 145:1-8

The lectionary in this “ordinary time” between Pentecost and Advent takes us through selected passages in the book of Matthew. Many of the passages in the next few weeks are parables that start like this: “The kingdom of heaven is like...” With these words we already know two things: this story may not be easy to understand and it is not how **we** usually operate. This is how God operates. This is what it is like when everyone and everything is in alignment with God, in alignment with Love. This is the story of what we strive for; the story of where we hope things will end up. But it doesn't mean that we will necessarily always understand the story or even like it at first.

For the Reign of God is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

There are details in this story that I want more information on so I can make sense of why a vineyard owner would act so strangely. What part of the growing season is it? Is this pruning time, harvest time? Why exactly did the owner keep going back to hire more workers every few hours?

Or in this story is it less about the work and more about the workers? Did the owner notice these people hanging out all day in the marketplace with nothing productive to do? The vineyard owner felt sorry for them so thought to give them some work?

I don't know much about business but it seems like a ridiculous way to run a business – having the owner spend valuable time hiring people throughout the work day and for the exact same wage. How can you stay in business if this is your day-to-day plan? It wouldn't take more than one day for people to figure it out and stop showing up in the morning.

If we identify with anyone in the story, many of us probably recognize ourselves as those workers who were hired early in the morning and worked all day. We are achievers. We get up early, if we work the day shift, work hard and get the job done.

On the other hand, if you have ever involuntarily been out of work, you know how difficult it is. Looking for a job can be demoralizing and depressing. It is no fun waiting for that call back. But even though it is hard, most of us here are well educated, have common sense and are part of a community. When it is time, we look for work through personal contacts or informational interviews or through the Internet. We are probably not standing on the street corner hoping to be hired for a days work. The laborers hired throughout the day in this parable are the people standing in the 7-11 parking lot hoping that truck will pull up for them. These are people we often pass by on our way to work. And in some communities they are feared and despised.

But in this parable the laborers are not to be despised or feared. They are to be hired because they need work. And the vineyard owner comes through for them. These hopeful workers are just trying to make enough money to feed their families for a day. When the vineyard owner comes to hire them early in the

morning they are offered a fair daily wage. Those early hires agree to the offered wage because it is reasonable for a days work. It is not a lot but it is the going wage for a day's work.

This is a familiar theme in the bible, receiving what you need for the day. Remember the children of Israel in the wilderness? God sent manna for them to eat. But they were to gather only what they needed for one day. If you picked up more than you and your household needed for a day, the manna went bad. It was a daily ration.

Or think of the prayer that Jesus taught, "give us this day our daily bread." We are not to hoard. We ask for enough. Of course what one person thinks is enough and what another person counts as enough may be quite different. But "daily bread" keeps us depending on God and each other.

Perhaps as the day goes on the vineyard owner realizes that the harvest is larger and riper than he thought. So every few hours he goes out and hires more workers. No matter when they are hired, each worker is promised the standard days wage for this kind of work.

But at the end of the day there is confusion. It seems like common sense to first pay those who worked all day and let them go home. And **then** pay those who you just hired an hour ago. But this owner pays the last ones hired and makes those who have worked all day stand and wait in line.

And that is not the only problem at the end of the day. **Now**, everybody knows what everyone else has gotten paid. There are people in the business

world who recommend that you don't let employees know each other's paychecks.

You may have heard of Lilly Ledbetter. Lilly worked for Goodyear for years and she was instructed not to talk to anyone about what she made. She was an obedient worker. But one day someone slipped some pay stubs into her mailbox at work and Lilly found out that the men at the plant were making almost twice what she was making, for the same work. She decided to sue Goodyear and eventually her case made it to the Supreme Court where she was told "too bad, nothing you can do, it took you too long to file your lawsuit, you can't receive any back pay to correct the injustice."

That makes me angry. I want people get equal pay for equal work. It is only fair. But that is not what we have in this story. The vineyard owner seems to have no qualms about paying everyone the same no matter how much work they do, no matter how long they work. And he doesn't even try to hide what he pays each worker. He asks those hired at the end of the day to come to the head of the line and be paid first. And then as they look in astonishment at their money, he pays the whole lot of them **the same amount.**

This kind of unfairness appears again and again in the bible. Think of another parable, the prodigal son who squandered all of his inheritance. In desperation and humiliation he comes back to his father, groveling. And how is he received? With a banquet and the best of what the family has to offer. Standing nearby is the older brother, who has worked and played by the rules and has not received this kind of treatment, ever. Is that fair?

Think of Jonah, trying every trick in the book to resist God's command but finally going to Ninevah to tell those sorry sinners to repent. Jonah would like nothing better than to see the Ninevites get what is coming to them. But they repent and God doesn't destroy them after all. Is Jonah relieved and happy? No, like the older brother, like those who worked all day in the hot sun picking grapes, Jonah is upset that God is so gracious and merciful.

It is hard to be the one that plays by the rules. We want fairness. It is a concept that we begin to understand soon after we learn to talk and we are looking for it forever after. We want life to be fair and on our good days we want it all to be equal. The issues of fairness and equality – between genders, between races, between the haves and the have-nots, between children in the same family – these issues dominate our lives.

At some point in life we may come to realize that life just isn't fair, that it is not possible for everything always to be equal. If that is the case, how do we read this story?

What would it look like to enter this parable through a lens of grace, as God must be doing? What if we could say, "Well it doesn't seem fair that I worked all day and this guy only worked an hour and made the same as me, but he is a father and has children to feed. I am glad that his children won't have to go to bed hungry tonight." Or, "I sure needed this work today and that woman must have too. I know her parents are desperately ill and now she will have the money to buy the medicine they need."

How do we see with grace when the rules get changed up? When fairness gets redefined and suddenly the first are last and the last are first. Anytime we get too comfortable, too established, anytime we play by pulling out the rulebook for every dispute, we better watch out. We are looking for a kind of fairness that God's mercy and grace can turn upside down in a flash.

We want this story to be fair. But this is a story about those who wait and wait and always get picked last. The kid that always gets picked last for kickball or baseball, the teenager picked last to dance or to go out with peers, the person who is always second choice for a job. For those who are used to being picked last, this story is good news because in the kingdom of heaven they will be picked, and they will be first to receive their reward. The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

The kingdom of heaven is not like this world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The kingdom of heaven doesn't have the same preoccupation with fairness that we do. The reign of God is good news for those who struggle with this world order. For those who have never gotten a break in life; who have showed up, waited in line like they are told, done it all right and still not quite made it. They've always been picked last. The Reign of God is good news for those people.

And for the rest of us who get lucky and do well even though we didn't work all that hard, or who have made it look easy, or maybe worked hard and felt proud, maybe even gloated about it? Well, the kingdom is for us too. But we won't get to be first this time. It is someone else's turn and we can just wait a minute.

There is grace enough for all. We can just wait and enjoy this strange turn of events while someone else is first for once.

For the Reign of God is like ... We aren't there yet. The Reign of God is not yet come, but as Anabaptists we believe that we can be part of bringing that reign now – on earth. We don't have to wait until we die. We don't have to wait until "Jesus comes again in glory." We can be part of an unfair generosity now. We can start practicing, getting in alignment with God and God's grace. We can share this good news, "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." And we will all be part of the reign of God.