

Matthew 20:1-16

## **Generous Grace**

A frail mother needs care and rather than going into long term care, her son takes her in, cares for her needs, loves her. He is the one picking her up and getting her to the toilet. He is the one who lovingly bathes her and brushes her hair each night. He is the one who has fed her meals and given up other activities in order to care for her. Not because he has to, but because he loves her and has a sense of duty toward her. There are others in the family, they will call or stop by when it fits into their schedule, but he alone has given up many things to care for her on a daily basis.

The mother dies and everyone is present to help plan the funeral. Sometime later the last will and testament of the mother is read. Everyone is kind of waiting for it, especially the son who gave up so much to care for his mother. He will receive a greater amount of the will to make up for what he has done. Then the words, the estate is to be divided equally among the children. Hold on! What! The son's gut is wrenched, the others try not to display their joy that they are getting more than they thought. The son thinks, "This is so unfair" even though he really did do all of it out of the goodness of his own heart. And the others, knowing it is unfair, still cannot believe their good fortune.

We each have our own story of when life felt unfair. Times when others seemed to be rewarded when we were not. We were passed over for the job promotion, though we worked overtime to impress our bosses and moreover to do a good job of whatever was asked of us. Parents or teachers who just didn't seem to understand our gifts and so we were never put on the display as the good child or the most accomplished.

It comes out as envy when we see A-listers on the red carpets. Or we see children of celebrities who seem to have it made and we think, "If I had only been born to people of wealth." They have done nothing to deserve what they have and don't even seem to really appreciate it; it was all about where they were born and to whom they were born.

This is how this parable of the labourers in the vineyard comes off to us. We see the injustice of it all. We automatically seem to side with those who came out to work all day and then don't get rewarded with a greater pay than those who were brought out later in the day. Even those who came at noon and three o'clock would feel that they deserved more than those who were brought out with only one hour of daylight left.

And really, who wouldn't be frustrated. If a business owner actually ran a business in that way, giving the same pay to all, no one would show up on time or at all. Economically, this parable does not make sense. No business would be able to survive this kind of practice. So, what is this parable about?

As with much of Jesus' teaching, there are layers and various ways we could go with our take on what Jesus was trying to say, but let's start with the first words, "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." This parable, nor any one of the parables in scripture, gives us a full picture of what the kingdom of God looks like here on earth or in heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like the story of the labourers in the vineyard, or a mustard seed, or a treasure hidden in a field.

There is no one way to adequately describe heaven or the relationship of God to human beings. In this case, the kingdom of God is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And the story continues as we have heard. I would hesitate to make direct comparisons between God and the landowner, this is a story to help us imagine something unexpected. The story builds up the tensions. There is mystery as the first workers agreed upon the usual daily wage. Then we hear that the next workers agreed to being paid whatever is right. We are not told what that amount will be. The later hires are not even given the assurance of being paid whatever is right, they just go to work.

Again, this is a parable. Picking apart details is not necessarily going to get you closer to the meaning of the story. We don't know why some were hired right away and others not. We are not told why someone would go to work for an hour, or even hang around to the end of the day and then not make sure they knew how much they were being paid for the work.

We wonder where Jesus, who is telling this story, is going with all this. Then the second half of the story unfolds. Those who were first to be hired wait

at the end of the line while those who showed up last are paid. When they see those ahead of them in the line, those who only worked a part of the day are being paid, the same amount they had been promised for the whole day, they must have begun to think, “Wow, we put in a whole day, I wonder how much that means for us? Gotta mean a bonus!”

The anticipation builds and then the shoe drops and that good old dollar that every one was paid ahead of them is what they also receive. Hold on! Wait a minute! That simply is not fair! I have been on job sites; the language would not be pretty. F-bombs would be more like the order of the day. There is no work site or work place, unionized or non-union that would put up with that kind of treatment of workers.

We tend to come to this story sympathizing with the workers who feel like they got shafted. Our sense of fair play and justice go into overdrive and one might even feel hot under the collar.

But hold on... What if instead you placed yourself in the line with those who received this gift. Think about your joy. Think about a time when you received something that you felt you didn't deserve. What about times when you finally felt heard, seen, appreciated.

I can't help but think of the protests and counter protests of this past week where some feel threatened because the voice of those who have been marginalized in the LGBTQ2S community are finally being heard. Or conversations of those who feel like people should have to earn their living and look down on people who need subsidized incomes or housing. There is talk of living wages, or basic income to just give people a hand up, a better starting place, and how often do we hear the voices of those who don't think their tax dollars should go to that. People get what they deserve, right?

Well turns out that God's economy is different. God's economy turns things upside down, where those who are on the margins, vulnerable, and struggling are seen and heard, are given what they need to survive. It runs against all our notions of fair play, that is until we are the ones that are seen or heard or benefit from the generous grace of others and that of God. And maybe that is what this parable is really about, God's generous grace to all, not just for some, but for all. Indiscriminately. Grace matters. Grace makes the difference. Grace is God's economy.

David Lose puts it this way, “When you're down and out, when you're the one at the bottom, when the world hasn't been fair to you, or when you're the one who screwed up and hurt yourself or someone else, then, suddenly, grace matters. Grace...is for the people who aren't okay and don't have it all together. It's [still] not pretty - in that it messes with our sense of order - but it is rather beautiful.”<sup>1</sup>

Or as Rolf Jacobsen writes, “Grace...a noun that is more like a verb. It is the free gift in which God gives all – eternal life, forgiveness, purpose, meaning – to human beings.”<sup>2</sup>

Generous grace. It is hard to wrap our heads around it. We often feel that grace should be earned, not just given, that is until we are the ones in need of grace. There is no moral to the story here, only the lingering question of are we ready to live into the world of grace that God imagines? Grace that messes with our sense of right and wrong? Grace that feels like it invites instability, questions, hope, and a sense of justice that errs on the side of those seemingly most underserving of it? Grace that, if it is there for all, includes ourselves?

May we begin to see our conversations, our politics and policies in terms of grace. Yes, people need a fair wage for a day's work, but how do we begin to lift up those who, for whatever reason, do not have the same advantages. Those who have waited in the market place, or street corner, or wherever, hoping to get picked like the child who is picked last for the team. Those whose worth has been sucked from them because they cannot seem to find a way out of their situation or because of their gender, skin colour, place or family of birth and so start in a less than favourable position in life.

May we be bearers of generous grace knowing that we too have been the recipients of God's grace even when we did not deserve it. For all of us have done harm or been harmed. All of us know what it feels like to be last even though we seem to identify most closely with those who worked hard and appeared to get shafted by their employer.

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<sup>1</sup> [David Lose: Grace Isn't Pretty | Day 1](#). Accessed September 21, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Jacobson, Rolf A., Editor. *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffey Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Augsburg Books. Minneapolis. 2008. P78.

May we humbly remember God's love and generous grace in our own lives and work to truly bring God's economy of grace practiced on earth, hoping that we get to create a world that is a little of what heaven is like.

We ask it in the name of Jesus who knows what it means to be human.  
Amen.