

The Fairest in All the Land  
Matthew 20: 1-16 and Philippians 1: 21-30

From the get-go in this passage, Jesus is stepping on my toes, meddling in my business, making me uncomfortable, and bringing me to my knees. Jesus is teaching me again a lesson that I should already know and should be honoring. Forgiving is a seventy times seven way of living. We heard that last week, too.

He is preaching good news, proclaiming that we have more than our fair share of something the world cannot manufacture or give. We have grace, undeserved love. All of us!

Jesus intends for this to make us uncomfortable enough that we quit believing, especially we disciples, that we somehow deserve a bit more grace than others. Hardheaded humans that are, it often takes some toe-stepping for teachable moments. So begins the lesson.

The vineyard owner tells the hired hands, there is no cheating going on here. You are being paid the amount contracted from your start time. No more. No less. You are not to worry about the wages versus the work time of others. Sure, you worked long hours, but the truth is this: at the end of the day, you have experienced a gain not a loss. The money is mine to give, and if I give from a generous heart, well, so be it.

Jesus just told them, told us, told all of God's children, we have more than our fair share in life. We have grace. Undeserved, un-earnable, freely given, over-the-top, unconditional love from our Triune God!

This lesson is not about what is or is not fair in the business world, it is challenging our spiritual understanding of what is or is not fair. So, the meddling starts. Actually, it continues.

Earlier in Matthew Jesus started with a milder message about welcoming children. Those seemingly insignificant ones, he says, understand kingdom living more than us older, wiser ones.

Then along comes the rich young man wanting to know how he can buy his way into the kingdom. Jesus tells him there is no need to purchase a thing. Just respond with gratitude to God through generosity to others in the Lord's name. The young man cannot wrap his head around it and walks away.

Following this parable, I imagine Jesus in hair-pulling mode, his own, out of frustration. Mom asks Jesus if her sons James and John can have the premier seats at the heavenly table. Seriously, Jesus must be thinking. You still do not get it. Then with patience, the same patience we are given, Jesus says, okay once more from the top. Actually, in this case, once more from the bottom because has turned our thinking about giving and receiving upside down.

If we are honest, Jesus' patience with us all, in and of itself is grace, and Jesus has given us more than our fair share!

In one of the wonderful Charlie Brown Christmas specials, little sister Sally is making her Santa wish list. Toy after toy upon toy, on and on. Concluding the letter, she adds, “But Santa, if this is too much and too heavy for your sleigh and reindeer, JUST SEND CASH!”

When poor Charlie Brown sighs over her greed, her response: “What? I just want my fair share!”

My heart knows that there is no price tag, no pecking order, no “fair share” connected to God’s grace in Jesus, but my head, hard-worker, type A personality, that I am says “me thinks something stinks about this.” I wrestle, I think like many of us, with the balance of doing the Lord’s work and not tying it to my spiritual self-worth. It is not so much an intentional thing as it is human nature to think that the more, we do, the greater the reward, the bigger part will be our share.

My heart knows the grace that comes from living in the upside down world of Jesus, but it is kind of like my childhood memories Pepto Bismol, you know that pink tummy medicine that parents tried to pass off as “yummy bubble-gum-tasting” goodness! Good medicine, good for helping turn sickness into health, I guess, and I hated every minute of it! Thank goodness, my mom was patiently persistent.

But here is the good news and the good medicine: Jesus pulls no punches in telling us that if there is work to do, and if we have the gifts to do that work, do it! Do not sit around and compare your work with the work of someone else. Our labor is about exercising a lifetime of grateful work for God who enabled the work in and for us in the first place. In Christ, God gave us grace, unearned, unconditional love; gave us life, gave us work; gave us salvation, and that is more than our fair share.

Bottom line, top line, and all between, grace is only God’s to give. If Jesus stopped there, we could take this lesson, tie a bow around it and call it the best gift ever. And, it is. But Jesus is not finished. He adds this disorienting tag that calls us to responsible, grace-filled living. By the way, he says, if you really understand what I am saying, then you will be someone who stands for the ignored, the left-outs, even the idle ones discarded by society because in God’s eyes, they are worthy of dignity. Jesus further defines God’s “fair” for us. The generosity of God’s heart is intended to trickle down to ours, and from ours to others.

It is the same message that Paul is sending to the Christians in Philippi from his jail cell. In God’s upside-down world, suffering is a gift, and if that is what it takes to live as Jesus lived for us, well just do. Do it, not because of any reward it will get us- after all here he sits behind bars- but because that is what our Lord deserves!

When we fall short of God’s expectations, when we try to play the one-up game with our works and deeds to catch God’s attention, it is God’s undeserved love, God’s grace that catches us instead. A grace that keeps us wrapped in a salvation that has nothing to do with us and everything to do with Jesus.

Why? Because God, aka the vineyard owner, is interested in one thing only: making sure that every last person gets a place in the vineyard early bird, late night owl, those who can work and those who cannot or will not, the well-known and the not-known-at all. This is not about the vineyards produce or productivity of the workers, it is about God's generosity in using everything God created for the good of all, even when some fail to see the world through God's eyes.

Our pay is the joy knowing that by serving others, God has given us the chance, with the help of the Spirit, to make this earthly kingdom a better place. God's grace is bigger than any fair factor we could ever imagine. Every child of God gets more than a fair share of life. We get grace!

We do not always like what we see through God's eyes. More often than I like to admit, I find myself identifying with the up-at-dawn, work-til-the-day-is-done kind of people! There are times when I am uncomfortable with, even suspicious of overly generous people. And when it comes to my faith, it is a bit of a rub to think the gates of heaven will be opened for those who didn't work as hard as I did in the church...whatever that work is.

Sometimes I do not want to live in the upside-down world of the gospel. And then I hear the voice of God asking, "Are you envious because I am generous, which actually translates this way in Greek: Is your eye evil because I am good? Ouch!

The Lord's words are stern, a bit harsh, brutally honest, but if we are looking at this through God's eyes, we can embrace the reality that this parable is not intended to chastise its original listeners, or us, for our lack of generosity to the late-comers, the lazy or limited who come to this thing we call faith; it is meant to give us another opportunity to take a deeper, closer look at our understanding of God. God's generosity has nothing to do with equality, and everything to do with grace. God's grace cannot be measured. It is limitless.

And if we lose sight of that, we lose sight of God's kingdom or as commentator Lydia Gordon says, if we lose sight of that, put yourself at the end of the line and you will see this parable through a whole new set of eyes.

We are in this vineyard together and Jesus says our work is to look at each other through God's eyes. Each of us valuable. Each of us equal. She ends her comment with this: when it comes right down to it... we are all, the 5 o'clock worker. We all showed up late. The only one who was here in the beginning, the only one deserving of a full wage was Christ. Christ was the one hired at dawn- and truth, Christ has already done the vineyard work for us, do you see that?

Perhaps this year, like Sally, when we make our Christmas wish lists, we can ask for an abundance of gifts...more gifts of the Spirit for us and the world to use in serving others as Jesus served.

It is because of him...we all receive more than our fair share! We have been gifted with grace!