

^{NRS} Matthew 20:1-16 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

In today's Gospel reading... the laborers who were hired first had a contract with the landowner to work hard... in the hot sun... all day – 12 hours – for the normal day's wages... one denarius. Not a princely sum... in those days it was just enough to scratch out a living and keep some food on the table for your family. When additional workers came to join them, they were grateful for the help. Then, at the end of the day... when the cool breezes started to blow... they saw the paymaster start first at the back of the line... and give to those who had been there only an hour a full denarius. If the landowner paid the one-hour workers that much... how much more would he give the ones who had been there all day?

For a moment... these tired, sweaty workers must have thought they were about to be rich. Then the paymaster continued down the line... one denarius... one denarius... one denarius. Everyone... even they... got the same amount.

The 12-hour workers complained, of course...why wouldn't they? It just wasn't fair. They had worked all day in the hot sun... and those people in the back hadn't started until it was nearly the cool of the evening. But, the landowner said: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

Because Jesus says this is a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven, it doesn't take a seminary education to figure out the landowner is God... and we are the workers. So the lesson speaks to us very personally.

And... it may not surprise you to learn that many church people identify with the workers who were there all day... the workers who seemed to have earned their place in the Kingdom... and who, by the way, felt they had been treated rather shabbily.

Now, this might be a good time to lay all our cards on the table. Deep inside most of us... if only for a fleeting minute... is some tiny belief that all your hard work, especially during the last year and a half – keeping yourselves safe... and the church, going... while helping others who needed it – that all this might be worthy of at least a little more of God's favor than those who spent their lives recklessly and selfishly.

In a world that can be unfair, at least God's Grace should be fair... wouldn't you think?

“So the last will be first, and the first last,” Jesus says, scrambling the usual order of things... challenging the assumption that the front of the line is the place to be.

Barbara Brown Taylor once said this parable “is a little like cod liver oil: we know Jesus is right; we know it must be good for us; but that doesn’t make it any easier to swallow.”

The summer between graduation from seminary and ordination, I worked as a chaplain intern at the University of Virginia Hospital. Each week the experience seemed to take on its own theme. One week, most of the patients and family members I saw were demonstrating courage... another week, hope... another, wisdom.

The week I’ll never forget is the one I call “Hell Week.” I heard more about hell, fire and brimstone that week... than I did as a child at tent revival meetings in the small town in West Virginia where I grew up. And, there was a lot of hell, fire and brimstone in those tent revivals!

In the hospital that week, I listened to people who are afraid to let go and die because they might go to hell.

I heard family members who were in agony because they thought a loved one might go to hell... and the family should be able to do something to prevent it.

Patients asked if God would send them to hell for questioning why they had to suffer so much. Hell, fire and brimstone might fill a lot of pews in some churches, but I can tell you... it gives little peace in this life, and a lot of anxiety about what comes next. Even worse, it keeps the focus on us... on the outcomes we want.

That week in the hospital I was so grateful for our Reformed Theology of Justification by God’s Grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ. It kept me going... still does.

Of course, Presbyterians believe in hell. It’s in the Bible... 15 times. But the emphasis is on grace... which, by the way, is mentioned 127 times... very often by the Apostle Paul:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”¹

Toward the end of Hell week at the hospital I came face-to-face with what those words mean in real life. My pager went off during lunch and I hurried to the nurses’ station, where they told me a woman with multiple organ failures was struggling with the decision to sign a “Do Not Resuscitate order” and she wanted to speak with a chaplain.

Entering the room, I was startled that her disease process and pain had made her almost grotesque.

“I’m in so much pain, I can’t stand it,” she said. I can’t breath... I’m on dialysis... my heart is failing... I’m dying and I’m afraid of going to hell.

“I have a daughter who died five years ago... and want to be with her; but I know she’s in heaven and I will go to hell.”

“What makes you so sure you won’t be with her?” I asked.

“I have sinned... a lot,” she said. “I used to go to church. I believe in God, and I believe in Jesus. What can I do?”

“Do you love God and believe that Jesus is your Lord and savior?” I asked... all the while silently pleading with God to help me do and say what was right for this woman.

“Yes I do,” she said. But, I’ve sinned and I’m afraid I’m going to hell.”

“There is something you can do.” I offered, wondering by what authority I, who was not yet ordained, was doing what I was about to do.

“You don’t have to tell me, but you can tell Jesus about your sin... that you’re truly sorry... and ask for forgiveness.”

“But, I sinned a long time ago, too. How can he forgive me now?”

¹ Ephesians 2:8-9

I told her the parable about the people who were hired to work in a vineyard. The ones who came at the beginning of the day... then others, around noon... more, around three... and still others, almost when the workday was over. They all were paid the same. Everybody got a full day's wages.

"You see, with God, it doesn't matter if you started early in life... in the middle... or near the end. We all can find forgiveness in Christ. That includes you."

When she questioned me about how to ask for forgiveness, I pulled together a simple prayer of confession, which she repeated after me. Then, she opened her eyes and looked into my face.

"You are forgiven," I assured her. "Now, love God with all your heart... and love others as you love yourself."

The next morning I learned she had died peacefully in the night.

This was a powerful experience that went to the very heart of my own faith. Everything I ever believed, and everything I learned in seminary, pales in light of this encounter. For it challenged me to affirm my belief in confession... and pardon... and, especially, God's grace.

When we read the prayer of confession in worship, it feels liturgical... not something bloated by pain... or us, looking desperately for a way out of our life choices. But, this experience was urgent and gritty – a woman who was hard to look at... hard to care about... was dying; and her expectations of what came next were grim.

To be honest, I could not escape feeling some judgment of her... and the same sense of unfairness that the 12-hour workers grumble about in today's parable. How could she, who was so crude and grotesque, receive the same love and forgiveness as the saints who live good and faithful lives – including those we know... and those who have already gone before us.

Then I remembered... we don't see as God sees. By Divine standards, we're all at the back of the line... crude and grotesque.

And yet... though none of us could ever earn God's grace, we still receive it through faith... trust... in Christ Jesus our Lord who asks that we love him by loving one another... even strangers we don't know... even those who seem to be unworthy.

Then I understood. I could not believe fully in grace and pardon until I was able to love those who could show me my own brokenness. Until I could love this woman.

And yet, who was I to tell her she was forgiven? This was real: her anguish; her ugliness; her sin; my sin; my ugliness; my anguish. In truth, I could not pardon her. Only God can do that.

I could do what I did because I believe and trust that God's forgiveness and pardon are there for all of us... by grace alone... through faith in Christ Jesus.

For reasons we can't understand, God will save places we don't like... and people we think are just too wrong, or misguided, to love. And, it doesn't seem fair.

When we realize this, we can pout and complain like the 12-hour workers; but that won't change anything. God's grace will still be unfair, and that may be the best news we've ever heard.

Because, in the presence of Holiness we are not divided into categories, such as: bad... good... or best... with us being the best, of course... or at least good. In the presence of Holiness, we're all flawed creatures: equally in need of God's reconciling work through Jesus Christ; equally dependent on the comfort and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

And grace doesn't come in Small, Medium and Large. It's just one size fits all: extravagant... unlimited... unmerited... always greater than we deserve... more than enough to go around.

And our appropriate... irresistible... response to grace is gratitude... deep gratitude that begins to nudge us... call us... so that over time... bit-by-bit... the things *we want* to do – both individually and as a congregation – are transformed... more and more... into the life God wants *for* us. Lives that support each other... that reach out to help strangers... that invite people we have yet to meet to join us in trusting that the future rests secure in hands that are full of forgiveness, redemption and deep, abiding love: for you... for me... and yes, even the woman in the hospital.

God's grace isn't fair... but it sure is Amazing! Amen.

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