

**Grace Ain't Fair!**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**

I. Introduction

A. We are a judgmental lot

- I am glad that my salvation doesn't depend on you people
  - And you better be glad that yours doesn't depend on me!
- Those were my thoughts one Wednesday night as we served clients at Blessings of Grace, the food pantry housed at First UMC in Jefferson
  - It was a challenging night
  - Lots of people were there
  - We were still new at this and didn't have the system down pat
  - Not all of the volunteers had arrived and we were swamped
  - In other words, I was not at my best and neither were others
  - I found myself thinking some pretty harsh things and I'm pretty certain, based on some of the looks I was getting, that some of those folks were not praying blessings upon my head
- And as I left that night, pondering the events of that evening, these words came into my head
  - Be glad that your salvation doesn't depend on them and that theirs doesn't depend on you!
- I promise you that this was the voice of God to me that night
  - And it brought me up short
  - Because it is so true
- If your salvation depended on me, most of you wouldn't make it
  - And I'm pretty sure I wouldn't measure up if you got to decide
  - Because we humans don't look at each other with grace

B. Hard truth about grace

- Not just about Jesus and me
  - Also Jesus and YOU and Jesus and THEM

- Story about Will Willimon and the pastor appointed to the ignorant, backwards congregation
- As my former DS Elijah Stansell used to say in greeting at our district meetings, “God loves you and I have to!”
- This is the hardest thing about grace
  - As Jesus reminds us, God makes the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike
  - He died for all, including you and me, the Baptists down the road, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists
  - And when we really get that, we can feel like those first workers in a parable Jesus tells about the workers in a vineyard

## II. Jesus’ parable

### A. The parable

- **Read Matthew 20:1-2:** “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.
- The vineyard owner needs workers to bring in the harvest
- Analogous to day laborers we might see today
  - In a lot of towns, they stand at street corners, in parking lots of shopping centers, by the railroad tracks
- Hires a group at the beginning of the day and agrees to pay them the usual wage for the day
  - In our terms, he may agree to pay them, say, \$80 for the day, or \$8 an hour
  - Not extravagant
  - Bare minimum needed to survive, to meet their daily needs
- **Read Matthew 20:3-7:** <sup>3</sup> When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup> and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup> When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup> 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?’ <sup>7</sup> They said to him,

‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

- Why do you think he hired these new workers?
  - Does he need more hands to bring in the harvest?
  - Jesus doesn’t say it explicitly, but he certainly implies that something else was going on
    - The owner returns to town, sees others standing around, and asks why they aren’t working
    - No one hired us, they said
    - So, the owner hires them
  - He shows them grace
    - In the hymn “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love” we sing in one verse about working side by side, protecting each one’s dignity and pride
    - Work gives dignity
      - I was talking a woman who worked with homeless people about one who had gotten a job and what a difference it has made in his life
      - He had a purpose in life and a new dignity
    - By offering these men the chance to work, even for a little while, the owner protected their dignity as well as extended them grace
- Quitting time comes at six o’clock
- **Read Matthew 20:8-10:** <sup>8</sup> 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.’ <sup>9</sup> When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup> Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup> And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> 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.’
- Owner instructs his manager to pay the last hired first

- Lots of speculation about why the last hired were still available so late in the day
  - Lazy, drunk, shiftless
  - Probably the weakest and least desirable
  - But Jesus doesn't tell us
  - And our assumptions say a lot about us, don't they?
- Regardless of why they were still unemployed at five o'clock, they worked an hour and were promised a fair wage, though no exact amount is specified
- Imagine their surprise when the manager hands them \$80!
  - Paid a full day's wage
  - Probably expected \$8 and got 10 times as much
- The workers hired first watched with delight, imagining their good fortune
  - If these Johnny-come-latelies got a full day's wage, just think of what they would get when they had worked so much harder and longer
  - Now imagine their disappointment when they received \$80, which is exactly what they had expected before they saw the last hired getting paid
- And they grumbled to the owner, complaining that he was unfair
- **Read Matthew 20:13-16:** <sup>13</sup> 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?' <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first will be last."
- What do you think about the owner's answer?
- It seems to make logical sense
  - Did I not pay you what we agreed?
  - Can I not do with my money what I want?
  - And if I want to pay these the same as you, how does that cheat you?

- Are you jealous because I am generous?
- Well, yes, we are!
- It just doesn't feel right
  - In a world in which we think we should be given what we deserve, what we earn, then those who worked the longest, endured the heat and bore the burden of the day, should be paid more
  - That's fair

### III. God's New Math of Grace

#### A. Grace makes no economic sense

- Well, as the title of this sermon says, grace ain't fair
  - Grace is not about getting what you deserve, because if it was, well, we'd all be in a heap of trouble!
- Grace makes no economic sense
- In God's kingdom, grace isn't about economics as we know it
- In his essay, "God Is Not a Capitalist" Michael Budde writes: "First and foremost, from a capitalist point of view, God has a lousy business model...there's no way in which this is an economically competitive practice. Overpaying the latecomers results in a wage bill higher than one's competitors; no extra payments for the all-day laborers invites resentment...shirking, sabotage, and more. It also provides no material incentives for working hard, for loyalty to the boss, for reliability. It's bad labor utilization and is certain to put God's vineyard out of business sooner rather than later.

Consider some of God's other bad business practices: doesn't lay off enough workers, even when they are clearly not pulling their weight; consider his preference for the widows, the orphans, and the poor. God passes up countless moneymaking opportunities – Jesus doesn't charge for healings, no one paid for those loaves and fishes, and he sent off a rich young man who could have been a generous supporter and underwriter."

- Over and over, in commentary after commentary, the point is made: by human standards, grace just doesn't add up, doesn't make sense

- Some try to make it do so, retelling the story so that the workers hired last miraculously work so hard that their labor is equal to the first hired
  - But that isn't the story Jesus told
- And it offends our sense of fairness, just like it offended those workers
  - If it were up to us, those who worked longest would earn more, or, to put it another way, those who worked least would have earned less
  - Like I said, aren't you glad that your salvation doesn't depend on the likes of me?
- Philip Yancey writes in his book *Rumors of Another World*, "Grace is irrational, unfair, unjust, and only makes sense if I believe in another world, governed by a merciful God who always offers another chance."
- He goes on to describe grace in action in South Africa after Nelson Mandela's election
  - Did you know that when Mandela was inaugurated as president of South Africa, he invited the man who had been his jailer, who had undoubtedly abused him verbally and physically, to join him on the inauguration platform?
  - Mandela then asked his country to practice grace through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
  - "The rules were simple: if a white policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Hard-liners grumbled about the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free, but Mandela insisted that the country needed healing even more than it needed justice."
  - Yancey describes one such encounter between an elderly black woman and the man who had killed her son and then burned her husband alive; they forced her to watch as they poured gasoline over him and set him on fire
  - When the court asked her what she wanted from the policeman, she answered, "Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give."

Twice a month, I would like him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real.”

- The courtroom erupted into singing “Amazing Grace,” but the policeman, Mr. van de Broek, didn’t hear it; he had fainted dead away, overcome by the grace he was shown
- As Yancey notes, “Something beyond justice took place.”

B. God’s grace isn’t fair but it is generous

- That was the last question that the landowner asked the grumbling workers: Are you jealous because I am generous?
- God is a generous God and will not hold back what you need
  - We are given exactly the right amount of grace for us for the day
  - God’s grace isn’t about getting what you’ve earned but about receiving what you most need
  - No extra portion for a rainy day
  - Reminds us to lean on God each day, to trust in God’s grace every day, that God will provide our *daily* bread
  - Whether we come early or late to God, grace is there for us, the grace we need to live
- Generosity is the cornerstone of grace and God is a generous God to all the workers

III. Invitation

A. Rules of grace

- God’s grace doesn’t add up
- God’s grace is about giving us what we need, not what we’ve earned
- And God’s grace is generous
- Receive God’s grace
  - A little girl accompanied her mother to the country "general store." After the mother had made a large purchase, the proprietor invited the girl to help herself to a handful of candy. The child held back.

"What's wrong? Don't you like the candy?" the proprietor asked. "Yes, I love candy," the child replied. Whereupon the proprietor put a hand into the jar and dropped a generous portion into the girl's cupped hands. Later, the mother asked the girl why she had not taken the candy when it was first offered. "Because his hand was bigger than mine," she replied.

- God's hands are very big
- Aren't you glad it's God's hands that pour out grace, not ours?