

Matthew 20:1-16 (NRSV) ~ [Jesus said,] “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 gave 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.”

Come to the Table of Grace

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is a little like cod liver oil: You know Jesus is right, you know it must be good for you, but that does not make it any easier to swallow! Along with the Parable of the Prodigal Son, today’s parable is one of those stories of forgiveness and grace *so radical* that it offends, because it seems to reward those who have done the least while it sends those who have worked the hardest to the end of the line.

Jesus often told parables with a surprising ending. Today’s parable is a good example. It was about this time of year, in the latter part of September, when the grapes would be ripe in Palestine. It would be a race against time as the grapes would have to be harvested in a hurry before the October rains. Every available person in the community would be employed a day or two to help harvest the grapes. Very early in the morning the owner of the vineyard went to the marketplace to find workers to help. The work would be hard, but the landowner promised to pay the workers well for their efforts.

You just heard how the owner brought in more workers all throughout the day, so that at quitting time, some had worked only a short time, while others had toiled in the hot September sun for 12 hours! The detail of this parable that is so difficult to comprehend, is that the owner then paid all of the workers equally, FOR UNEQUAL WORK! Those who had signed-on late in the day were thrilled! Those who had worked long, hard hours, while still being paid the amount agreed upon, were outraged at the owner’s lack of fairness.

Of course, this parable isn’t about harvesting grapes at all. It’s about GRACE! And it proclaims loudly and clearly that **grace cannot be earned**. When the disgruntled workers expressed their outrage, the landowner replied, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree to work for me for the usual daily wage?” It was true, indeed. They were paid

what was promised. The landowner did not cheat them in any way. He did no wrong. Then he asks them an interesting question, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Here is the important lesson about the grace of God. **God's grace is a gift!**

Whether we have been in the family of God for a long time, or are a recent arrival, the benefits of faith are the same. Perhaps God is more interested in being generous than in being just – by human standards. WOW! That's a tough concept to swallow. But, we might as well face it. Many of us who have served Christ for a number of years would like some kind of bonus. It just doesn't seem fair, does it, that people can waltz in here at the last minute and claim the same benefits as those of us who have labored for decades? That is some of the good news of the gospel. And, there is good news for the day: ***You and I have a great opportunity. We can be agents of grace on God's behalf.*** Place yourself for a moment not with the workers in the vineyard. Rather, now, the owner has selected you to dispense the silver coins, the payment. Can't you see the eyes of those first workers as they receive a silver coin for only one hour's work?!? Wouldn't you like to bring that kind of joy to someone's life?

Linda Malone tells about a transformation that occurred in her life. She was one of the million homeless people living in the streets and under bridges in cities across our country. Linda used words like "confused, lost and dead" to describe those days before she found Christ. Actually, Linda will tell you Christ found her.

A couple in a local church, Tom and Claudia, wanted to help a needy family. Through a social service agency they were given Linda's name. At the time they met Linda she had two young children with a third on the way. Her husband, in trouble with the law and on the run, had deserted Linda and the children. She had no place to live.

Tom and Claudia quickly realized that they could not help Linda and her children by themselves. They enlisted the help of others in their Sunday School class and church. They helped Linda and her children find a place to live. They helped her find a job, too. Tom and Claudia kept the two children for a week while the third was being born. Other people in the church took turns caring for the children, some provided food and clothing. They supported and helped Linda in many ways.

One Sunday a while later, Linda stood up in church to give her witness. She told the congregation that she had been sober for six months. She now had a job and was able to be a responsible mother to her children. She was no longer worried about living on the streets, spending time in jail, or having her children taken away from her. Linda not only used words like "confused, homeless, lost, and dead," but as a result of her new life she used words like "joy, love, direction, coming home, life, and saved by Jesus Christ."

Linda and her children now attend worship almost every Sunday, with Tom, Claudia, and many members of that Sunday School class sitting close enough to help out with the children. Linda is also a helper in the three-year-old Sunday School class where the children love her. "If you know anyone who doubts that Jesus is alive," Linda says, "let them talk to me."

Undoubtedly there was someone in Linda's church that complained about all the attention Linda and her children were receiving. That happens. Thank God for the others,

Come to the Table of Grace

Matthew 20:1-16

Rev. Beckie Sweet

though: Tom and Claudia and other members of that church who knew that they themselves were recipients of God's grace and passed that grace on to Linda and her children. None of us deserve God's grace; it is freely, generously given. We then are called to be partners with God in bringing that grace to others.

Obviously, Jesus is saying to us that entrance into God's realm has nothing to do with how much we deserve it, based on length of service. It has everything to do with coming to a faith which recognizes that we could never do anything to deserve the awesome sacrifice Jesus Christ offered for us. And yet, the gift is offered to us over and over again. Each time we fall back into sinning, that grace is available to be claimed at God's generous hand. So, Jesus is saying to us that entrance into God's realm has nothing to do with how hard or how long you work! That's a difficult concept for many of us to accept. We were taught that if we work hard, we will get ahead. If we work hard, our parents will be proud of us. If we work hard, we will be good citizens, good role models, even good Christians. And all of that is true, but listen to the Gospel – none of our good work will gain us entrance into the Realm of God. That is God's gift to give freely, and there will always be room for more.

Our table today is set like a pot-luck supper buffet. Now, I have been feasting at pot luck suppers all of my life, in groups that ranged from a few friends gathering for collegial support, to whole congregations feasting prior to a ministry program. In my experience, sometimes quite amazingly, there has never been a shortage of food! Yes, sometimes a family will attend who did not bring a dish to share. There was still enough. Sometimes we would host a touring choir of hungry college students. The feast was abundant. We even invited folks just to bring ingredients to add together for a pot of stew, and all were fed. Yes, there were times when the dishes of baked beans outnumbered those filled with vegetables. Sometimes we wondered if we would have a dessert smorgasbord. There was always enough, and usually leftovers to send home with others. The same is true of God's ample supply of grace. There is always enough for all, and plenty for the recipients then to share with others.

Come to the table of grace! Whether you have been coming to God's table for seventy years, or perhaps you are coming for the first time. Christ seeks to lavishly cover your sins with loving forgiveness. When we begrudge God's generosity, it is only because we have forgotten where we stand. So, on this and every day, we should join the angels of heaven in rejoicing when any sinner repents and receives God's Grace. God's generous love and grace will cover us all! Amen.

Singing – Come to the Table of Grace.

Come to the Table of Grace.

This is God's table, it's not yours or mine.

Come to the Table of Grace.