

Grace: Go Figure

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Richard Topping

Sunday, August 15, 2021

Isn't grace a good thing? Then why does it create grumbling, outrage, anger, a union grievance in our story for today.

In church, we all sing about grace . . . "praise with us the God of grace" and "God of grace and God of glory . . ." and "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." Grace is a beautiful idea, a wonderful concept.

Grace colours everything we sing and say in church. We're immersed in the notion of grace. Theoretically, grace is a central idea, an essential concept, the absolutely necessary ingredient in our Protestant confession of faith. We will conclude the service today after we hear, 'And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us, now and always.' We believe in grace, don't we?

Well, we believe in 'grace' until we read stories like the one from Matthew for this morning. What we see in this story is grace embodied . . . awkwardly at work in a real-life situation "grace among grapes."

And look at what happens when grace intrudes into the work-a-day world. We meet 'an eccentric employer', whose generosity is off. His payday policy breaks the connection between work and reward. This is not easy to take. Prophetic types would circulate a petition, start a union over these vineyard economics. What's he doing? Equal pay for unequal work! That's not fair. That's an outrage. Like a professor who gives the same grade to people who were there all semester and those who came half-way through, and then a few who caught half of the last lecture since there were donuts. Outrageous.

Early in the day, noticing that the crops are ready to be harvested, the Land Owner takes his truck to the local manpower center. It's harvest time, and so everyone needs labourers. That's why the vineyard owner gets there early and contracts with up-first-thing-in-the-morning labours for a good wage, a denarius for a day's work. The eager workers, the good boys, load into the truck and get dropped off at the vineyard. They know what to do. They are 9 to 5ers.

Well, as the day wears on, the owner of the Winery sees that "the harvest is plentiful and the labourers are few." So back he goes to Kelowna. This time not to the manpower center but to the main street – where there might be some stragglers on benches, guys milling around who might work. A group loads into the truck, with the simple assurance that "whatever is right I will give you." At 9 a.m. the second group trundles off into the vineyard.

But still, even with these toiling two groups of workers it is not enough. The harvest is good; the grapes are ripe, and it's now or never. So he's back in the Ford 150, into town again at noon and at then at three in the afternoon. You can imagine the kind of workers he's getting now. These are the riff raff, the fellows who slept in. The effects of last night are just wearing off; the aspirin is just starting to take effect late the next afternoon. They jump in, why not; the promise is a fair wage.

Finally, with just one hour left in the workday, a last group is required to finish it off. All that's left at this late hour are the idlers, the loafers – the up-at-the crack of noon types. They think, "what the heck, it's only an hour before dark. Maybe we can make enough for magnum or a joint, now that it's legal." They jump into the truck, someone will probably have to show them how to pick grapes; they straggle into the vineyard, stepping on the grapes, juice all over their shoes. By the time they get started picking, it's just forty-five minutes to pay time. These guys are practiced at minimal investments of energy – late starts and early finishes are their game.

The whistle blows. The shift is over. Nothing left to harvest but the days' wages. The landowner says the accounting department: "Bring me the last ones first. I'm serious, pay the last ones first." This is where our story takes an unexpected twist. The day long labourers – the guys who are always up at 6 a.m.– they think, well, "he can pay them from petty cash; why not hand out the loonies and toonies first."

The loafers have only worked one hour, but the envelope is chock full, no change, all bills – one day's wage. They are thrilled. The news spreads like wildfire to the back of the line. The guys who came at 3 p.m. do the multiplication. 'Let's see, we worked two more hours than the latecomers, a full day's pay for each hour.

But they get the same wage as the guys who just put in an hour. The smiles fade. There must be some mistake. This can't be right. There's got to be a miscalculation, a clerical error. But no, the crew that came at noon and the nine o'clock also get one denarius. "You mean he's going to pay everyone the same amount, regardless of how much work?" This is ridiculous. Unbelievable.

With muttering in the background, the guys who have never missed a day's work in their lives line up. They came before dawn carrying their lunch which they made the night before and set out on the counter so they won't miss it. The difference between one hour and twelve hours is so great that there is no way the pay could be the same. But they get one denarius. The Bible says, "They grumbled." That's short-hand for what they really said. "We are choice workers. We were here early – and what is it about people who get up early and their need to tell other people they get up early. We've been here all day. We worked through the heat and through lunch hour. Those others didn't even break a sweat, and yet you, Mr. Owner – You with your icon on the wine bottle - treat us like them, exactly like them. What about seniority, advanced standing, work done, results achieved?"

Sitting there on the verandah, sipping a nice Syrah, Mr. Jackson-Triggs says, "friend, I am doing you no wrong; didn't we shake on a denarius?" and if you look in the envelope what do you see? "A denarius," is the angry answer. "Why should it bother you, if I choose to be generous? Don't give me that hairy eye-ball – the one that's always fixed on 'fairness.' I can do what I want with what's mine. And why do you high achieving, up at the crack of dawn, work through your lunch guys, always get so mad at generosity? What do you think it's your vineyard? Take your denarius and your envy, get out of here, and, by the way, have a nice day!"

Whatever else we might say about this owner, you can bet that tomorrow morning nobody is going to show up at 6 a.m. He has subverted the vineyard economy, encouraged laziness with his equal pay for unequal work. He will only be able to break the link between work and reward once. He's lost his leverage. No one is going to work the whole day long under a reign of indiscriminate generosity, are they?

And yet the parable begins, "the kingdom of heaven is like . . . like an eccentric landlord (God) who rewards every worker (disciple) with the same wage . . . It's a story told to a disciple, Peter, who asked Jesus, "what's in it for us." "What do we, the inner circle, up at the crack of dawn disciples, what do we get; what will be our compensation?"

As he stands there with Jesus, anticipating reward for his day long labour, Peter's thinking, "Surely we who have been with him since the beginning of the day will be rewarded more than everyone else? Clearly it can't be the case that those who have served long and hard in the Father's vineyard are going to get the same as people who suddenly get scared and turn to faith? Jesus can't be saying that for all our years of service there will be no golden handshake? If that's the way God treats labourers, treats us – the inner circle, the people who set up chairs and take them down after every meeting - if that's the economy of discipleship, who on earth is going to work in the Father's vineyard?"

Does this mean that people who worked the whole day long are going to be compensated for their efforts in the same way as the late in the day thief on the cross, who just arrived at the vineyard as the day ended? It isn't fair. If people who squeak into the kingdom of heaven get a full day's pay, then those who have been working in the fields all-the-day long, they get, well, stiffed.

Placed within the work and reward dynamic, it isn't fair. But maybe Jesus is telling us the story to point out how this whole work and reward mentality doesn't work when applied to Christian discipleship and church? Perhaps Peter and every disciple after him who thinks like this has it wrong. Graded compensation, hierarchy, years-served, tenure, seniority: none of it works in the kingdom of heaven.

A woman being interviewed on television was one of those heroic mothers who raised a large family single handedly. She not only raised them, but they were all successful, each having made remarkable achievements in their work. It was a great story.

In an attempt to get at some formula, some rule that others could apply in order to have similar success with their families, the equitable interviewer asked, "I suppose you loved all your children the same, making sure they all got the same treatment?"

The mother said, "I loved them. I loved them all, each of them, but not equally. I loved the one who was down until he was up. I loved the one who was weak until she was strong. I loved the one that was lost until she was found."

The Kingdom of God is like a mother who loves all her children according to their need and loves them until they all become who they were created to be. It is like that sometimes: the ordinary rules are put aside, and the first are last and the last are first.

Friends, let me conclude with something to ponder. I wonder if this parable has new relevance amid COVID-19. Some are working and some can't work and some can't work as much. Some have only ever worked a little in their whole lives. All are getting help!

I think I'm hearing a little resentment surface around unequal help given to those who work less, by guess who, those who work more. Our meritocracy shows its head. Maybe ours is a time when the ordinary rules are put aside, and we get to witness a parable of the grace of God. Maybe, just maybe, during strange and challenging times, we get to witness God's gracious M.O. in the indiscriminate care of everyone by the government, go figure! Maybe in the light of government policy we see the great light of grace?

In a book entitled Final Testimonies, the last thoughts and writings of the Swiss Theologian Karl Barth are gathered together.

In an interview on a French Radio station, the interviewer asks this Great Theologian in the final days of his accomplished life, "Who is Jesus Christ **for you.**" A great mind, a committed Christian, a man who raised opposition to the Nazis, a life-time of serious and hard work for the church behind him, Karl Barth answered, "Jesus Christ is for me precisely what he was, is, and will be always and everywhere, for the whole world..."

Could it be that the landowner of our parable (God) gives all his labourers (disciples) the same wage because this landowner gives just one gift to all – Jesus Christ. And this gift is always more than anyone deserves and can only ever be given "everything at once."

Grace means we don't get what we deserve. We get Jesus. And who could ask for anything more?

Amen.