

The Generosity of Grace
Matthew 20:1-16
September 20, 2020

This parable, found only in Matthew, holds a place along with Luke's parable of the prodigal son as one of the more offensive of Jesus' parables. Rather than a comfortable, reassuring parable, we find ourselves shocked and surprised when the outcome flies in the face of our value system.

Sound familiar? It should. Think "white fragility" and white privilege, or upwardly mobile. God acts in ways that are contrary to our conventional wisdom and values, so that the gifts of God will be bestowed on people in ways that we would likely not if we were in charge.

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The community to whom Matthew's gospel was written would have been offended by this story. Matthew's church was made up largely of first-generation Jewish Christians, who had been thrown out of the synagogue because of their conversion, and had also endured the destruction of the temple.

They had labored long and hard in the vineyard, and had to adjust to the expansion of the church to include Gentile converts, who were beginning to have influence in that community. "Not in my backyard!" would have been prevalent.

It isn't hard to imagine them "grumbling" and 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." Who are these "Johnny-come-latelies," otherwise known as the Gentiles?

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In the setting of today's story, when grapes were at their prime, a vineyard owner needed extra workers in order to harvest them quickly, perhaps not unlike in Napa and surrounding areas today. He went out early in the morning to the marketplace, where unemployed men and women were gathered in hopes that they would be hired for the day. A deal was struck with some workers, who agreed to the usual wage of one denarius for a full day's work, sunrise to sunset.

Concerned that the harvest may not be completed in time, the vineyard owner went back for more workers standing alongside the road --at nine o'clock, at noon, at three o'clock and at 5 o'clock, one hour before the close of the day. The owner promised to pay these laborers "whatever is right." At the end of the day, the owner ordered that everyone be paid, beginning with the last and going to the first. The ones who had been hired last received a full denarius – the usual daily wage. That was quite a nice tip!

Based on the core belief that “people should get what they deserve,” the laborers who had been hired first assumed that they would receive an even higher amount – perhaps a bonus. When they received what they had been promised, the usual daily wage, they “grumbled” about the unfairness of others being put on an equal level with them, despite the fact that they had labored all day long. We can imagine that the organization of Vineyard Workers Local #126 happened shortly after this incident!’

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I will never forget the first time I came to California to meet my future in-laws in 1990. We were on our way to the beach early one morning, before the sun got too hot. As we passed large fields of berries, I noticed dozens of people standing on the side of the road – most of them men, but a few women.

I asked my wife what they were doing there, and she said that they were laborers, hoping to get hired for the day to pick berries for minimum pay. Growing up back east, I had never seen such a thing. When we came back later that evening, there were still workers sitting on the side of the road – never hired for the day, and no wages to take home. I never forgot that scene, and I still cringe whenever I see it. I wish Jesus could have been there to rewrite the script. This parable would have been music to their ears, and water for their dry and thirsty souls.

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As the preacher Kentina Washington-Leapheart writes, “Our society is one whose very structure is rooted in systems that are designed to stratify individuals due to class, ability, race, gender, and all manner of other identities. The grumbling laborers in Jesus’ parable offer the familiar refrain of those born into and thriving within privilege: If you work hard and pull yourself up by your bootstraps, you too can be successful. Unfortunately, very little is ever said about the fact that not everyone’s bootstraps are the same length, quality, or level of durability—if you even have bootstraps at all.”

“Many people have been trained to believe that prosperity is a birthright if you are born into the right family with privilege. But there are limited opportunities when your citizenship status precludes you from applying for employment for fear of deportation. There are limited opportunities when, in the age of COVID-19, going to work every day can mean for the most vulnerable people in our society the higher likelihood of infection or even death.” (No Seniority, Kentina Washington-Leapheart)

There are limited opportunities when you’re black and can’t live where you want to live because of redlining, or get the job you would like because you were passed over due to the color of your skin or your educational background. Perhaps if we took the time to humanize the laborers—to think of them not just as nameless, faceless people standing in a long line, but as flesh-and-blood human beings in our own communities who are picked over daily in their pursuit of life and liberty—this parable would hit home more

deeply. I would like to think that Jesus would have taken the time to get to know many of the labors in the vineyard by name. The last being first and the first being last is more than just a lofty ideal. It is the very unusual and uncomfortable concept that is often the catalyst for equity, and perhaps reparations.

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Jesus enjoins those who were called first to comprehend the world into which they have been invited, and to join him in inviting the last ones—the sick, the poor, the women, the latecomers, the unimportant—instead of comparing and complaining. Perhaps that’s what Jesus meant when he said, “...the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

What would that be like for you if you were among the last to be hired, the last to be paid, the last one who mattered? What if the roles had been reversed for you? Would you interpret this parable in a different way? It is a disturbing thought for many, and yet, Jesus is inviting us to enter that world.

This story is just one example of many in which Jesus uses the power of story to upend the status quo. It’s one that can feel a bit unwieldy on first reading, or to understand that Jesus is talking to us and how it applies to our daily lives. Jesus himself would be in a good position to understand, since he was scorned by the scribes and Pharisees and angered many with his words and actions. In fact, it cost him his life.

If you’re among the first in whatever you do, can you really empathize with the last? The outcast, the ignored, the marginalized?

As Jill Duffield writes, “Perhaps if we pictured ourselves as the workers who came at the end of the day rather than those who arrived first thing in the morning, our response to God’s grace would be markedly different. But when we recognize the undeserved, unearned grace of God given to us, then we are able to truly rejoice not only at God’s generosity to us, but at God’s generosity towards others.”

“When we stop thinking we will get more, and instead recognize the value of what God has already given us, then we cease grumbling and respond instead with gratitude. We begin to live our lives out of generosity and a surplus, with no thought of whether we are last or first, but only joy in being called together to work in God’s vineyard.”

Jill Duffield, Looking Into the Lectionary, Sept 20, 2020

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I love the parables of Jesus, because they apply on so many different levels. There are economic and social realities that are paramount. But there is also the unfathomable and unconditional love of God that is extended to all – to Jews, Gentiles, Scribes, Pharisees,

the working class, white collar professionals, gay, straight, transgender, black, white -- I think you get the picture.

God's generosity of grace is extended to all. Eternal life is extended to all. Is anybody surprised? That in itself ought to shape our economic policies and the way we treat other people. We're all equal, and we're all abundantly blessed when it comes to God's love and grace. It's doesn't get any better than that.

Let's not be envious. Let's not be jealous or indignant that others receive what most of us already have. Let's not complain when Jesus notices those who are last, and tells them to go to the front of the line. And let's not forget that God's vineyard is large enough for all.

No one gets cheated. No one gets turned away. God doesn't give us what we deserve. God gives us *more* than we deserve. God's grace is generous, and now we can be too. Amen.

Matthew 20:1-16

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

20:1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

20:2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

20:3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;

20:4 and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

20:5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.

20:6 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?'

20:7 They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

20:8 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.'

20:9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

20:10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.

20:11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,

20:12 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.'

20:13 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?'

20:14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.

20:15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

20:16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."