

Text: Matthew 20.1-16
St Stephen's

March 25th, 2007
Sunday

The Great Grace Reversal

We are in a message series on grace in Lent. You might be interested to know that **Jesus never used the word 'grace'**, but he lived a life of grace, and time after time when he met people, they went away talking about how he loved them – what he did for them. In the end, the writers of the NT grabbed the word 'grace' to describe him, and used it hundreds of times. Because he was "full of grace", they said. Grace is God's "**One Way Love**" His "gift love" – and Jesus was certainly full of this love.

Today we are **looking at his teaching**. He was **always teaching about grace** ... think of the beatitudes, think of his frequently repeated statements about the last being first, think of his stories about prodigal sons being welcomed home, stories about people with impossible debts who were suddenly forgiven all, stories about small seeds becoming great trees, stories about crops growing to great abundance and the farmer doesn't know how – Jesus was always teaching about grace.

I've selected one of these parables for our lesson this weekend. It comes near the **end of Matthew**. After Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler, and you remember that he walked away from Jesus, the disciples asked him,

MAT 19:27 "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

The disciples **plainly thought they deserved much**. They had worked hard. Given up much. Left homes and jobs and property. They had suffered with Jesus, walked with Jesus, labored with Jesus

through these three years. When no one else believed, they believed. The disciples thought they deserved much. So, "What will there be for us?"

Well, the short answer was **more than they expected and more than they deserved** (thrones, authority, 100x anything they had lost or left, eternal life,) – **that's grace**. They were encouraged, excited, heartened! Who wouldn't be when you find out you are getting even more than you deserve?

But then Jesus went on to tell them a story about **the challenge of grace**. The challenge of grace is that **it oftentimes turns things upside down**. The last jump to the front of the line. How do you feel when people jump in line in front of you? Isn't it easy to get upset about that? How do you feel about what Jesus said...

"many that are first will be last, and the last first."

Matthew 19:30 (RSV)

That is because **grace isn't fair**. It can't be counted, can't be measured out with exactness. It has no boundaries. It can't be contained. It is alive, it has a mind of its own, and it pushes and surges and overflows. **Are you OK if grace is not fair?**

It is not such an easy question to answer, because there is **a big part of you that says, "No!"**. Jesus wants us to answer this grace challenge with a large, "Yes!". So he **tells this story that just flushes it right out...**

For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

Matthew 20:1-2 (RSV)

Early in the morning, **about 6 AM, this landowner goes out to hire** laborers for his vineyard, because there is a lot of work to do to get the crop in. The work day in that season is long, about 12 hours. So he hires all the guys he can find early in the morning and **negotiates their salary**: 1 denarius for the day. It is a generous salary for a solid day's work, and **they eagerly accept**.

But as the morning goes on, it is evident there is **much more to do**, and **he looks for more help**. He comes back into the village at 9 AM and hires more men, and then he returns again at noon. But there is still more work to do! So he comes back at 3 PM, and then comes a **fifth time** to hire, just an hour before the 6 PM end of the day. Finally the long day ends and pay time comes.

And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.'

Matthew 20:8 (RSV)

So **they line up to be paid**, as instructed, with the guys that hired on at the 5 PM hour first in line. They haven't even broken a sweat. And the foreman pays them **a full denarius!** Wow! That was a surprise. And then as he pays the guys who hired on at 3 PM and noon – they get a full denarius also! This landowner is **very generous**. And the word spreads down the line. "They are all getting a full denarius!"

Then we are told...

*Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it **they grumbled** at the householder, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us...'*

Matthew 20:10-12 (RSV)

'Grumbled' means they were **angry**, and began to **mutter**. They

trash talked the landowner. Earlier in the day, he was a great guy to hire them on at a solid wage. But now he was **a cheapskate**. He was...**"unfair"**. That was their charge! *"You have made them equal to us who have born the burden of the work and the heat of the day!"*

They had a point, didn't they? He was unfair. And it raises a question. **Is God unfair?** Doesn't it seem like it, sometimes? Look around... we have these **little lists** of people who seem to have gotten **a better deal in life** than we, and we think, "Unfair!" Maybe it is because of differences in our families, or in career opportunities, or in our children, or in health...

Isn't there something inside you that secretly believes that **God has been unfair** to you? Do you find yourself **secretly angry** or muttering about it? Jesus has his eye right on this part of our hearts.

But let's think about this for a moment...

There are **two ways God deals with people**.

The **first is by giving people exactly what they deserve**. An hour's pay for an hour's work. A full day's pay for a full day's work. You get only what you earn. When God does that he is '**fair**'. We have a name for this, we call it **justice**. And it has a mechanism by which it operates. We call that mechanism **the Law**.

The **second way that God deals with people is by giving them more than they deserve**. A full day's pay for a half day's work. You receive far more than you could ever earn. When God does that we say he is '**gracious**'. We have a name for this also, we call it **mercy**. And there is a mechanism by which it operates. We call that mechanism **the Gospel**.

Which do you want to be the **central dynamic** of your life? The Law or the Gospel? You have a lot to say about this. **You have a choice** to make.

Most of us quickly say we want grace. Well, there are a few of us who want to go the Law route. But that route will demand far more than you can ever earn. It is a tough and hard road, and exacts a terrible price along the way. It will, in the end, crush you and break you. And soon enough, you will be back with us who have learned that **life goes better by grace.**

But if you choose to live by grace, you must live by grace all the way. You can't choose "grace for me" and "law for all those people I don't like". Grace is a **jealous mistress.** She will not be content to have half your heart. You must be happy to let grace have her way. You must want grace for everyone. That is why Jesus tells this story.

And here is **what his story asks us...** What if God's grace is even more abundant towards others that it has been towards you? Is that OK?

Grace is not fair – it is beyond fair. It can't be regulated and counted and measured out with exactness. It can't be contained. It is not tame; it is wild! It overflows one life in a flood of goodness, and another life it just seems to give enough, just enough for the day. Yet both lives are under grace. Now, **are you OK with that?**

The 6AM workers were not. They were angry about it. They were just fine about the 1 hour workers being paid generously, but that meant they also should be **paid even more generously.** They

wanted **generosity to be measured out exactly**, fairly, justly according to – watch their hearts – what each worker had **earned**. Do you see what they have done? They have voted not for grace, but for law, for justice, and for a hard fairness linked to what they have earned.

Then the landowner asks them a question, and it is a deep searching God-question. This is the Living Bible paraphrase of vs 15...

"Should you be angry because I am kind?"

Mat 20.15 (LB)

To our embarrassment, **we can be angry when he is kind**. Lots of people get angry about God's kindness...

- There was Jonah who wouldn't go and preach to the Ninevites because he knew God would have mercy on them. And he couldn't stand it!
- There is the older brother of the prodigal son who watched his father throw a great party upon the return of his wild living younger brother. He couldn't stand it.
- Think of the first century Jews watching the Gospel spread like wildfire. Saul couldn't stand it.
- Think of the 16th century Roman Catholics watching the Reformation sweep Europe
- Think of a dying Episcopal Church in the West watching the evangelical Anglican church of the global South sweep continents with the Gospel.
- Think of what happens when a new church in town grows larger than all the older churches and reaches people long beyond the reach of the older churches...
- Inside healthy churches it can be newcomers developing ministries that grow and grow and grow while those who have long tended the vineyard see their own ministries dwindle and recede!

Grace means that God is always ready to give the undeserving more than they deserve. It often means the last jump to the front of God's line. Will you sign on to that as a way of life? As a way of your life?

Let me leave you with **two quick thoughts** about grace...

To say 'yes' to grace means I will **get something very clear: God has been better to me than I deserve.** Isn't that true? **What do you have that has not been a gift** from him? What? So I will **no longer say, "unfair"**. It means no more muttering about his generosity. No more anger. The fact is, we have nothing to mutter about. Nothing at all.

What might those **6 AM workers have said** when they saw how everyone was paid? Maybe something like this:

"Look at that, he's done it again! Isn't he wonderful? He gave those latecomers even more than he gave us! What a great God he is! Always giving and giving and giving! Always taking the last and making them first! What a God!"

Here is my second thought...

To say yes to grace **also means** that I **will be better to people than they deserve.** Far better. No matter what they deserve. It means **I will give grace** because I **have received grace.** When people deserve little, I will give much. I will do that at home. At work. Around town...

Can you think of some people to whom you might give more grace this week?