

Matthew 20:1-16: Laborers in the Vineyard
God is generous

My husband used this passage for church council devotions once and after hearing the parable, a council member commented, “So do you think everyone showed up at 5:00pm the next day?”

Today, we are called to struggle with the fact that our works do not make us more acceptable to God, but that God reaches out to us and calls us to be in relationship with him however we are, wherever we are. And that is grace.

During Jesus’ time, the daily wage was generally an amount that provided enough food for one family for one day. The laborers were to be paid on the same day as they had worked because it was Jewish law.¹ In this parable, Jesus is illustrating the human tendency (that existed then and still exists now) for us to get upset when those who we see as not measuring up to our status or merit are rewarded – the same as us. It cheapens our reward.

This is classically shown when you give a toddler a lollipop and they think it’s the best thing in the world, until the toddler sees someone else with lollipop and suddenly the focus isn’t on enjoying your own lollipop anymore, but “what’s over there?”

The vineyard is the kingdom of heaven and Jesus is the landowner, going out and finding idle people to work. In the Greek, the word for “idle” can also mean “lazy” or “useless”. Jesus continues to seek out these idle people throughout the day to fill the vineyard. Even though the early laborers get exactly what they had expected and agreed upon, they are still furious that those who *appear* to have it easier get the same pay. Jesus shows the great generosity of God and exposes our jealousies. The last shall be first.

It can be easy to believe that the harder you work, the more God will bless you. I was listening to a program on NPR yesterday about unemployment in the United States and someone commented that in her experience, the idea of the American Dream is starting to crumble. The assumption was you work hard, pull yourselves up by your bootstraps and then you should be a success. This woman said she worked her tail off in her position, but her company couldn’t afford to keep her any longer with the recession, so she was let go and is having a difficult time finding another job. She said she will continue to work hard at finding work, but she can’t put all of her trust in her own hard work anymore. It had betrayed her. What happens when our best attempts and hardest work can’t seem to get us to where we want to be?

Well, theologian Paul Tillich would say, you are finally ready to experience true grace. Maybe that’s exciting to you or maybe you would just want to punch this guy in that face. He believes

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd Edition. (New York: Oxford Press, 2001) p. NT 37

we spend so much time being our own gods that we only turn to God or are open to the grace of God working in our lives when things don't go as we planned.

He says, "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life....It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know.... Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*"²

Is it a challenge to really believe that God loves you exactly as you are? We can see glimpses of God's great acceptance and love through our experience with others. I remember when Ben and I were first dating in seminary and I came down with this awful cold. I hadn't showered for a few days and was lying in a sea of used tissues. The last thing I wanted was for Ben to see me like that, but he insisted on coming over, bringing me orange juice and movies. Then, as I felt like the grossest person in the world, he gave me a kiss on the forehead and said, "feel better."

We can get pretty down on ourselves. We can think that our sin separates us from God; that we are not good enough to be accepted by God. But, you would be wrong, because Christ has come. He has seen the lost, the idle, the sinful, the people who are waiting for purpose and direction and something to belong to that adds some meaning to life. God seeks us out in the midst of our anxieties and idleness to show us a better way – life with him, life in the vineyard – full of purposeful work, belonging, a sense of wholeness. And while this kingdom of heaven, or God's reign, has not yet come in its entirety, we glimpse the kingdom whenever God's grace and love is made manifest in the world. And all of this, because God chooses to come to us.

This month, we are focusing on the faith practice of worship. God's great grace and generosity can be seen in worship every week. We celebrate Christ coming to us as the Word in Scripture and also through the sacrament of communion. This Word and this Meal is for everyone, no one gets a little more or a little less, what God offers is just right. In these ways, we experience God in community. Maybe we get a glimpse of the kingdom. In all of our worship, we give thanks to God for coming to us and accepting us through the cross. We worship side by side with each other, realizing that there will be jealousy and hard feelings at times in our life together, but knowing that our focus is always on God. Centering on God's gracious will unifies us as believers enabling us to see the Light whenever it breaks most generously into our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Tillich, Paul. *The Shaking of the Foundations*. (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1955), Chapter 19. This material was prepared for www.religion-online.org by John Bushell.

