

PENTECOST XIX

And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner. Matthew 20:
14

I have read in commentaries and books about the Gospels that this is perhaps the hardest parable to explain, to defend or to accept. Some workers get to work in the vineyard at the crack of dawn. The landowner hires another lot at 9.00 a.m., more at noon, more still at 3.00, and the last lot of hopefuls at 5.00 p.m.

And at the end of the day, they all get paid the same. Some have worked a twelve hour day, we presume, and some only for an hour. But everyone receives a full day's wages. How unfair! The late arrivals, the over-sleepers, the layabouts, all get the same wage as the diligent, responsible workers. The owner's action upsets societal order altogether, an order that establishes and maintains – in theory– an important principle of justice.

Unfair labor practices! we think. (And the diligent responsible workers thought so too.) And don't they have a legitimate gripe? What injustice! How can the landowner get away with this? And do we really want to think of God in this way, as one rewards sloth and industry equally?

If the story seems to us remote and alien, a story about grape-pickers in first century Palestine, what about today? What about Equal Pay for Equal Work? –a contemporary claim included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We know that women in the U. S. still make only – what? 70 cents for every dollar a man earns. And what about undocumented immigrants, who perform so many tasks that our full citizens are reluctant to undertake? Are they paid fairly? And do these inequalities really reflect God's idea of justice?

Well, we may say, *life isn't fair*. We're adults, we know this, right? Life isn't fair. *Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people* as well – and most of us here, I imagine, don't believe that God causes those sorrows and afflictions and injustices. But then, what do we do about it this state of affairs? On a personal and emotional level, what do we do with our feelings, when someone we know or work with seems to be rewarded undeservedly? Or when we are passed over, mistreated, or burdened in some grossly unfair manner? And on a societal level, what do we do with our passion for justice in a flagrantly unfair and oppressive world? How do we prevent ourselves from becoming overwhelmed with the knowledge that our human systems are

so broken, so universally unfair? How do we keep from succumbing to bitterness or to despair?

I have a very keen sense of personal injustice. I suspect it comes from being one of five children, and always having to compete for attention, affection, and whatever else was on offer and seemed to be unequally distributed among us. I think the refrain *it's not fair* may have been the most often-repeated phrase in our household. Privilege, sadly, does not seem to prevent us from brooding over not getting what we think are our just deserts.

In reality, my siblings and I all received many, many blessings – love, attention, opportunities, and just plain *stuff*. But knowing that intellectually, and even giving thanks, as I do, continually, for the grace-filled life I have been given, I can still be very quick off the mark when I feel treated unjustly. I feel worst when I think I've been unfairly attacked or wrongly accused. But – and this is harder to confess– I can also feel mean-spirited when I see other people getting rewards or recognitions I think I deserve, equally, myself. In other words, in my low moments, I sometime begrudge other people their moments in the sun, if I'm not getting my own, as well.

So, with that bit of personal confession, let's go back to the parable. On the surface, the parable may raise our hackles about human injustice and equal pay for equal work. And if the folks who had worked from sunrise to sunset had gotten short-changed somehow, that would be a legitimate response. *But in fact, everyone gets paid full wages.* Nobody is underpaid, and most are overpaid, according to our human reckoning. So maybe it's a little chintzy to complain? To complain about generosity? To complain about grace?

Because that's what today's parable illustrates: the strange and surprising grace of God. Grace is a cherished concept to Christians – including me– because grace demonstrates God's mercy, God's action, God's presence in our lives, however feckless or unworthy we may imagine those lives sometimes to be. *Amazing Grace* is by far the most popular hymn to American churchgoers – and to many of the “unchurched” as well, I suspect. And yes, we'll sing it later this morning.

But we must not let the popularity of the notion of God's grace obscure its radicality. God's grace is not cheap, and it is not divorced from God's righteousness. And God's righteousness is different from what we might imagine. Our parable this morning, this vivid and apparently outrageous story, makes that clear.

Because God's grace, divine grace, does not operate according to the merit system or to fair labor practices. God's grace operates by different rules, different logic – or illogic. And the operation of God's grace can be especially threatening and offensive to those of us who, by birth or other accidents of destiny, are already blessed –blessed by good fortune, by a good work ethic, or whatever

Who's the audience for this parable? Primarily, the disciples. The parable is part of their instruction as they move with Jesus from Galilee toward Jerusalem. It's not addressed to outsiders or to seekers, but to those who have been with Jesus during his ministry, who already know something about divine grace. They are privileged. They have a special place with Jesus. They are, for purposes of the parable, the ones who came first thing in the morning, who were first hired, who have been working all along, and who can expect full recompense, whatever that may mean, at the end of the day.

And now they hear, by implication, that at the end of the day they can expect no more than anyone else. No more grace. No less, mind you, but no more. Why is Jesus telling them this now? Because Peter has asked, in passage just before today's Gospel,

"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" And Jesus replies, *Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."*

And he illustrates what he means with the parable of the landowner and the workers. In God's economy, Jesus seems to be saying, things are turned upside down. But he's also saying, and this is where God's economy is truly, truly different from our own economy, or at least, different from how we experience our own – in God's economy of grace there is plenty for everyone. The terrible sad irony of the parable, and it's an irony that reflects the dark places in our own souls, is that the workers who complain are not grumbling about scarcity, they're protesting about *abundance*.

Can we truly resent the blessings that God bestows on others, if we are already abundantly blessed ourselves? Can we truly begrudge grace to those less fortunate than ourselves? And, a harder question, can we protest against divine grace and generosity showered upon truly mean spirited or even hateful people, when we ourselves strive so earnestly to be good and to earn God's favor?

As I was preparing for this sermon, meditating about justice and grace, I pondered

Michael Paulson's article in Monday's Globe about the mosque that has recently opening in Roxbury. Michael writes,

Although mosque construction has proved controversial in many places around the country, it has been particularly contentious in Boston, according to a national watchdog group.

"Usually we find there's some level of resistance, but the situation in your area was unique in its level of vitriol and viciousness," said Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Washington, D.C.-based Council on American-Islamic Relations. "It was atypical in the level of controversy that was generated by those who were opposed to the mosque, and I don't mean legitimate controversy, I mean fake controversy. There's an effort by some minority of people in any community who seek to marginalize Muslims and demonize Islam, and that's what we saw in this case."

We definitely feel the pressure," said M. Bilal Kaleem executive director of the Muslim American Society's Boston chapter. "I feel that everything we say is overanalyzed and overscrutinized to a degree that's certainly unfair, but I feel that it's also an opportunity in disguise, which is that people are asking, 'What do Muslims think? Who are Muslims?' And even though the questions are coming in a very pointed, accusatory sort of way, it's still a chance to speak for yourself."

Muslims gathered at the mosque for a Ramadan worship said they believe the controversy has strengthened their community. "The struggle was part of it - it's representative of the struggle that we're going through right now as a community," said Najiba Akbar, who is the Muslim chaplain at Wellesley College and works with Tufts and the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization.

"The hardships, the suspicion, the anger, the mistrust - all those things are part of the American Muslim story right now, and I feel like we've grown a lot through experiencing that," Akbar said. "The bad parts, the good parts, the solidarity that came out of the interfaith community supporting us during the struggle - those all kind of made this experience harder, but at the same time more special, and more powerful."

Here's how one group of people, or some of them, have managed a situation that they deemed unfair. They have reframed hostility and threats to their presence as challenge to their community to grow stronger, to become more outgoing as well as more cohesive internally. They have done their best to turn a perceived injustice into a perceived grace. They don't deny that injustice has been done to them. But they focus instead on the blessings that have accrued to them. At least, that's the story.

And then, there's the disciples' story, which becomes our story. What does it mean for them to be the insiders, to have been with Jesus and his blessings of divine

grace from the early morning of his ministry? What happens to them at the end of the day? What is their payment? Are they the first, or the last? Are they rewarded in full?

It's the disciples, after all, who are there at the appalling, bloody end of the day, beside that cross on Calvary. And then it is they who live another day, to carry on the story of the marvelous works of God. And then it is they, most of them, who die difficult deaths of their own. What kind of repayment is that for their long faithfulness?

Well, we remember them. If not for them, we would not be here. If not for them, there would be no story of Jesus, no Christianity, no church. We honor them and praise them and pray in their names. They inspire our faith. They are with us still.

And what about us? We too, stand beside that cross, some of us from early morning, some of us arriving only at the end of the day. All of us, today's parable seems to tell us, may receive equally and fully God's blessing.

Or we may not. That determination is not ours; it belongs to God. But I think what the story of the Muslims at the Roxbury mosque suggests, and what is Jesus is telling his disciples in today's gospel, is this: we are being blessed all along. God's mercy moves among us always, grace upon grace. The more we are able to receive God's graces in the here and now, the closer I believe we are to *living* our eternal life. And so we pray always to remember *'tis grace has brought us safe thus far/ and grace will lead us home.*

Alleluia! Amen