

“Unmerited Grace”

By Tim Hall – 20 Sep 2020 (16 Pent A, Proper 20)
Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, Bluemont, VA

[Exodus 16:2-15](#), [Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45](#), [Philippians 1:21-30](#), [Matthew 20:1-16](#)

Let us pray... “Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.” Amen.

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A little boy in church for the first time watched as the ushers passed around the offering plates. When they came near his pew, the boy said loudly, “Don’t pay for me, Daddy, I’m under five.”

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Best of friends, Rabbi Schwartz and Father O’Malley were at a diner enjoying lunch. Father O’Malley put down his ham and cheese sandwich and commented, “This sandwich is so good! Kosher dietary restrictions made sense in ancient times, but when are you going to join the modern age and eat delicious, wholesome food like this?”

Without missing a beat, Rabbi Schwartz replied, “At your wedding.”

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Words of wisdom: “There’s a fine line between a long, drawn-out sermon and a hostage situation.”

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Jesus shares another challenging parable in our Gospel lesson today. This story, called **The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard**, is the age old description of workers gathering at a particular spot where a manager can pick them up and take them to the job. It goes on today, particularly in construction work, with the under employed gathering at the local 7-11 or Home Depot, hoping to pick up a day’s wages to help their family make it through another day. This parable describes the kind of thing that frequently happened in Palestine, where the grape harvest ripens towards the end of September, and then, in a short time, the rains usually follow. If the harvest is not brought in before the rains come, it is destroyed. To get the harvest in is a frantic race against time. Any worker is welcome, even if he or she can only give an hour of work.

In the narrative, a landowner goes out at dawn to hire workers for his vineyard. The workers agree to be paid a *denarius*, the standard daily wage, and go to work. As the day goes on, the landowner continues to hire more workers, even as late as 5:00 p.m. Then at 6:00 p.m. he instructs his manager to pay the workers their wages, as was the custom.

At this point the narrative takes a curious twist in the process of payment. The landowner tells the manager to pay all the laborers one denarius, beginning with those who worked for only an hour at the end of the day. Seeing this, those who had worked for several hours longer expect that they will be paid proportionally with additional money. However, they are amazed, astonished, and angry that they too receive only one denarius.

The upset workers confront the landowner, pointing out they worked hard for twelve hours in the scorching heat. It was unfair that they should get the same pay as those who had worked only one hour. Their attitude is similar to the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who complained that in all the years he had worked for his father, he had never been rewarded like his younger brother.

The landowner reminds the workers that he had paid them *exactly what they had agreed on* earlier in the day, so they should take their money and go. He further asks, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" The parable shows the infinite compassion of God. God's Kingdom has a reversal of what is commonly expected in terms of rewards.

Where do you see yourself in this parable? Those that worked all day? The late comers? The landowner. As is usually the case, when we think about it we can probably find ourselves in all those roles at various times. When have you felt jealous because someone else received as much as you did, be it praise, or money, satisfaction or love, when you felt you worked much harder than they? Have you ever felt that you received reward much more than you deserved? I hope so!

The thing is, and we see this theme over and over again... you can't earn grace. God's gifts to us are unmerited. True gifts are given out of love. Joseph's gift to his brothers. God's gift to the Israelites in the desert. The Israelites feel that death would be better than the suffering they have had to endure. But God comforts them with meat and bread, and later water from the rock (and protection for the Egyptians). And so they choose life and the glorification of God. We also see this in the Psalm. The father's gift to his prodigal son.

Another time, Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Think of a child's gift... the wrapping, the drawing, the joy in giving it!

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." ~John 3:16

Giving and forgiving seem to go hand in hand. As a matter of fact, forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts. Remember last week's Gospel lesson... Jesus tells Peter not to forgive only 7 times, but 77 times. In other words, never stop forgiving. And then he tells the parable about the slave whose debts were forgiven and who, then, would not forgive as he had been forgiven. I guess he was not familiar with The Lord's Prayer!

Is there anyone you need to forgive? Anyone from whom you should seek forgiveness? Don't let what's unforgiven fester. It can be a huge relief. A gift that you give yourself and another. A burden lifted. And how can we look to give more generously? Out of true love, not as a reward for services received. That's what Jesus is telling us to do. To be like that vineyard manager. To be like God in our generosity.

What does that mean for us as individuals? Or for us as a church, a part of the body of Christ. What could that look like here at Good Shepherd? That's where we need to set our sights and our hearts. To give like children, for the pure joy of giving. To forgive again and again. For as St. Francis said,

"It is in giving that we receive, and it's in pardoning that we are pardoned"

As Father Ralph sums up today's Gospel in his sermon, titled "God's Radical Giving",

"The apostle James said: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift is from above, coming down from (God) the Father of lights." We human beings cannot earn this grace, but it can be *given*. God gives because God is love, and the principal quality of love is to be gracious. Thus all the laborers in God's vineyard receive the same reward, since in the Kingdom of Heaven there is no favoritism."

Thanks be to God.

Amen!

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Special thanks to The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Bayfield for the portions of this homily depicted in blue, from his sermon titled "God's Radical Giving" written for 16 Pentecost, Year A, 20 Sep 2020.