

“God’s Economy”

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Matthew 20:1-16

You’ve been an assistant professor for ten years. You’ve received excellent reviews. You have an impressive publishing record. Your students line up to register for your classes. Life is good and your department chair has told you that your advancement to associate professor is just around the corner. Wow! Finally, after paying your dues and keeping your nose to the grind stone, it is all about to pay off!! During lunch you are introduced to a new faculty member in your department, a young promising scholar who just completed his PhD. This youthful professor, who is now your colleague exclaims, “I am so happy. I never imagined that I would I would begin my career as an associate professor. This is beyond my wildest dreams.”

Would you share your new colleague’s joy? How would you feel? Does this seem fair? You’ve heard the phrase, “life isn’t fair!” Today’s gospel reading, by anyone’s standards, doesn’t seem fair.

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And 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?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When 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.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each

of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, '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.' ¹³But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last." *The Word of the Lord...Thanks be to God*

"If grace was fair would it be grace?"

Be reminded that Jesus is not recommending a business model in this parable. We know that if a business owner practiced what the landowner did that business owner would quickly be dealing with a worker revolt and a bankrupt business.

Jesus begins the parable, *"for the kingdom of heaven is like....."* Jesus is giving a glimpse of God's economy. *"If grace was fair would it be grace?"*

The kingdom of heaven is like..... *"a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard."* The landowner personally went into town, filled his pick up truck with laborers and brought them back to his vineyard to work. This was clearly a hand's on landowner!

At 6:00 o'clock in the morning he heads into town and negotiates a day's wage of \$150 with his first group of laborers. Being ready to work at 6:00 am, they had to have been the most motivated, bright-eyed, strong and best-of-the-best workers. They knew they were in for a long, hot, grueling day but, hey, \$150 bucks is \$150 bucks and that kind of wage would easily feed their families.

Then the landowner goes in again at 9:00 am, noon and 3:00 PM. He had a huge vineyard and he wanted to hire as many workers as he possibly could. Then, at 5:00 PM the landowner takes one last trip into town and hires his last group of workers. *I wonder about these 5:00 PM workers? Who were they?* Perhaps they had been partying all night and had just pulled themselves out of bed and decided to mosey down to the marketplace to see what's happening? Or maybe they were older and, while they had always been good workers and were motivated to work, it took a good long time for their bodies to get in gear? Or perhaps they had household duties or family members to care for and couldn't make it to the marketplace until 5:00 PM? Or maybe the 5:00 PM crew had been rejected by so many other landowners that they had given up hope of ever being chosen. But, that day, they decided to give it one last try. Whoever these 5:00 PMers were, the vineyard owner wants them, hires them and promises to pay them a fair wage just as he did the other hires!

Six o'clock came around and the landowner brought all the workers together and he began to pay them beginning with the 5:00 PM hires. Wow! They must have been surprised when they looked at their pay checks. \$150 bucks! They must have spontaneously started shouting, singing and dancing for joy. They had never experienced such generosity. Now those who had been hired earlier in the day thought, *"if the landowner is paying these late comers \$150, then we will surely receive a sweet bonus. Can't wait to see how much more the landowner will give me."* But when they looked at their pay check they were shocked. \$150 bucks! What's up with this? The hair on their sun burned necks raised and they protested, *"Hey, wait just a darn minute. We've been busting our backs in this hot sun all day long. Our muscles are aching and we have blisters on our hands! And you're giving us the same \$150 bucks you gave these late comers? That's not fair!"* And we would all agree that is *not* fair!

If grace was fair would it be grace?

With whom do you identify? With the workers hired late in the day, who reacted with joy when they were given more than they deserved? Or with the workers hired first? Those who worked the longest and the hardest and felt cheated because they felt they deserved more than the late comers? *With whom do you identify?*

Chances are most of us identify with the hard working early birds because we've lived by the saying, "*the early bird gets the worm.*" Let's face it, most of us Presbyterian types are hard working, law abiding, faithful older brothers and sisters who stay on the farm while our younger brothers and sister go off and squander the family's assets. It was John Wesley who stated, "*There are few matters more repugnant to reasonable people than the grace of God.*" And he was a Methodist! Unlike the vineyard owner, we keep detailed records. We spend our lives figuring what we are due and carefully watching others lest they receive more than we think they deserve. From childhood on we are trained to keep score!

Knowing that we have an inclination to keep score, Jesus tells this story to give us a different view of reality....a glimpse of God's economy. The owner gave each worker a day's wage which was enough to feed the family. The landowner wasn't paying on the basis of merit, but on the basis of need. He wasn't trying to be fair. He was being generous. The master didn't hold back anything he promised. We can't receive an extra portion of grace, for we are given all the grace we need.

However, as long as we believe that God accepts us because we are 6:00 am strong, faithful, hard-working workers we will *never* understand grace. But as we begin to take an honest look at our true self....the self most others never see but God knows....we begin to see the reality of our own neediness and we begin to comprehend that we, too, are 5:00 PM hires. We are recipients of blessings far beyond our efforts and, if we will, we join in the chorus of those who sincerely proclaim, "*But by the grace of God there go I.*" As our spiritual eyes are opened to God's ever present generosity we come to the conclusion that we can never work or earn our way into God's good grace. When touched by grace we stand as little children who have received life as a wonderful, surprising gift, not as something we have earned or can control.

When we welcome God's love and begin living in God's grace, we can stop acting like jealous workers and be freed to open our hearts and hands to other 5PM hires. When we welcome God's love and begin living in God's grace, we can stop counting the hours and recognize that the vineyard is the best place to be. When we welcome God's love and begin living in God's grace, we can stop keeping score and start living in the joy and generosity of God. God's economy of grace is difficult for us to understand.

Today we have baptized *Andrew Michael Warner*. Andrew received the sign of God's blessing not because he deserved baptism, but because *Kristine and Brian* presented him for God's blessing. Like Andrew none of us have earned or deserved God's grace. God's grace is freely given and the best thing we can do is present ourselves to God each day with a heart of gratitude for God's amazing grace given to us 5PM hires. After all, "*If grace was fair would it be grace?*"

Amen