

## **The Challenge of Grace**

Menno Mennonite Church

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**Purpose:** To celebrate the grace given us freely.

**Message:** We are reminded that we are provided for, spiritually and otherwise, by the very hand of God extending grace to us all.

**Scripture:** Matthew 20:1-16 (I will read)

**Synopsis:** Grace is among the most basic concept of the Christian life. Indeed, it is the beginning of all things, and the point of the whole exercise. Yet we do not find ourselves living overly grace-filled lives. We demand more and more of ourselves, and worse yet more and more yet. We easily see ourselves in the parable as the workers who have sweated through the day and find ourselves resenting the purpose of those for whom it seem that much more easy and the more easily rewarded. We are called to extend grace to ourselves, recognizing that even still it is God who gives all that we need.

NRS **Matthew 20:1**

"For the kingdom of heaven  
is like a landowner  
who went out early in the morning  
to hire laborers for his vineyard.

<sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers  
for the usual daily wage,  
he sent them into his vineyard.

<sup>3</sup> When he went out about nine o'clock,  
he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;

<sup>4</sup> and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard,  
and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

<sup>5</sup> When he went out again about noon  
and about three o'clock, he did the same.

<sup>6</sup> And 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?'

<sup>7</sup> They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.'  
He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

<sup>8</sup> When 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.'

<sup>9</sup> When those hired about five o'clock came,  
each of them received the usual daily wage.

<sup>10</sup> Now when the first came,  
they thought they would receive more;  
but each of them also received the usual daily wage.

<sup>11</sup> And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,

<sup>12</sup> saying, '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.'

<sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them,

'Friend, I am doing you no wrong;  
did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?

<sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go;  
I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.

<sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose  
with what belongs to me?  
Or are you envious because I am generous?'

<sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

(Mat 20:1-16 NRS)

Sometimes you need to see things from a different angle to change your point of view. That is where humor lies. That is how you change the script. You have to look for the oddity to find what might be going on in between. Like the one about a Lufthansa flight which found itself in trouble over the English Channel and they realize that they are going to have to ditch in the water. The ever-efficient cabin crew has a plan. They get on the intercom and instruct that ‘everyone who can swim should get on the right side of the plane, and everyone who cannot swim should sit on the left. Upon landing on the water, everyone on the right side of the plane is to swim for England. Everyone on the left side of the plane.... Thank you for flying Lufthansa’. I will leave it up to you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, as to whether this can actually be recognized as a joke, let alone if it is funny. But it does what a joke is supposed to do; take the normal, everyday expectations of life, even if we have not experienced that eventuality, and turn them on their head. What is funny about a preacher, a rabbi, and a duck walking into a bar is the very basic fact that ducks do not, as a habit, walk into bars, or ask for things to put on their bill. This punch line, this little tweak at the end of the story that asks us to step out of what we expect and see the world in a little different way—and that different view makes all the meaning of the joke.

But that is what we have here: we have a punchline—a bit of body blow at that. A good parable does that. It takes the expectation—that Samaritans are on the whole not good, that the son that goes away and shames his family is not welcome, that the way of the world holds that those who do the most get the most—and flips it slightly askew, illustrating this radical notion of the Kingdom of God along the way. Jesus, ever the master story teller is taking the basic assumptions of the world and uses them to bend the expectation of the world into something new. As is so often the case, it is the punchline that makes all the difference. We can take this parable and translate it into our modern idiom, considering that day labors of our local Home Depot, and how the world works, and the whole thing holds up really quite well. I am guessing it is something that we are familiar with at least.

But I not entirely sure whether we like what it has to say. Sure it is a great metaphor of the kingdom of God. The vineyard, long a metaphor for Israel and the chosen of God, needs to be tended. There is no other way to get the work done—a task that still requires a huge amount of personal, practical labor. I was talking to a friend from the Central Valley of California a while ago and wondered allowed at the number of highly educated people who hail from the

valley, but no longer live in the valley. His explanation was simple: once you learn the work of the orchards, most people want to get as far away from it as humanly possible, the more letters at the end of the name the better. I am guessing the same might be true of folks around here. On the face of it, this is a simple story of a owner needing labor and going to lengths to get it. Time and again he does what is right in the means of the day, and goes to the marketplace and hires those who he finds. It is only when the punchline comes and the upstarts who just arrived get the days' wage for their promise of "what is right" alongside everyone else that the problem starts. It is the business school case study gone sideways. You can all but hear the muttering from the back of the line, combined with a note of expectation. Surely if they are being rewarded beyond what they deserve, we will be rewarded all the more—double; triple than what we expected. When it turns out to be only an equitable distribution of the wage, the world is turned upside down. The landowner is more than fair; he is lavish in his wages, defying expectation, and illustrating clearly the way of the kingdom as God's gracious reception of the last as the first. The point is that all will receive grace, and about that we should be happy, right?

But we know that this is just not always true. The poet William H Auden writes that "I know nothing, except that which everyone knows: if I am there when grace dances, I should dance." Were that it were so. As much as we sing of grace, laude the granting of grace, and think ourselves recipients of grace, there is an intrinsic discomfort that comes with it. Because most of the time when we see it worked out in the world around us, we wonder why. We might be called to dance for joy of what was lost now is found, but seldom do we leave our seats (besides, good Mennos don't dance in the first place do they?). I think we often have far more in common with those guarding the punchbowl at the party, making sure nothing gets too far out of control than those rejoicing for the gift of Grace along the way.

Because no matter how much I would like to deny it, I know that when I put myself in the shoes of the laborers in the story I find myself acknowledging the grievance. Had I been out in that field, I would have struggled with the righteousness of what was done and would have thought twice about hiring on the next day after that, even if that was basically fair. And I know why I would hesitate; anybody over the age of four does. It's not fair. It's not just. It is not how the world SHOULD work, even if it is the kingdom of God. If we play hard and follow the rules, we are rewarded. That is the world as it should be. That is the kingdom of God we want; that is the Kingdom of God we anticipate. We who do the right thing may not be better than

anyone else (that would be proud), but ultimately we want justice to be exercised, and justice demands more than merely everyone getting the same thing, but those who do more, who are more faithful get more for their trouble. We measure our goodness by what we do not do in a positive sense, but by what we deny ourselves: the calories we have burned, or better yet not consumed in the first place, the ethics that we maintain, the things that we resist, the people we distance ourselves from. We quantify our goodness by our capacity to adhere to the way of God, the way of righteousness, and the rules that come with it, conserving the finite resource of grace. Hearing that this is not the way of God or the way of the kingdom, it can ultimately tick us off. So we construct these elaborate systems by which we know that the saints (of which we are invariable one) are the ones rewarded, and those who are not, are not, at least not to the same extent the WE will be.

There is a story of an old priest who was sitting with a younger colleague who asked what he would change in his long life of ministry if he could. Thinking carefully, he said that he wished that he would have spent more attention and opportunity with those occasions that asked for forgiveness, love, and grace. “I’d risk more on the mercy of God.” He said.

But then he added “As I am getting older, it is harder for me accept what God is about. I have lived a good life. I have not committed a mortal sin. I have done my best and done my duty. It wasn’t easy. And now I am struggling with doubt because I look around me and see all kinds of people, young people, old people, all shapes and sizes who have never been faithful, who have lived selfish lives, and they are filled with faith and the spirit. Tell me is that fair?”

At the end of the day, one of the toughest tasks we must to do in our life of faith is to forgive God. To forgive God that the world is not fair, and the kingdom of God is not fair, but is open to all who but come. I like to say that I know only 3 things with certainty about the hereafter: that it will be good; that God will be in it; and that every last one of us will be on some level surprised. One of those surprises I think is that that there is not justice here, least not in the way that we understand it. Don’t get me wrong—The kingdom will be just; profoundly so, but it will also be gracious in ways that I think we might not always know what to do with. There is no special recognition of what we did or did not do, no priority of who gets in first or who is left to the very end. There is only grace. Only love. Only the same embrace for all who would come to God at all.

I think that one of the hardest things that we do is forgiving God for holding arms too wide open—so wide that even our enemies would be embraced and those we don't wish to eat with come to the table. God's love is not the reward for being good, doing our duty, living our ethics, offering worship, saying our prayers, or anything else. These things are important, but they are the response of the scandalous injustice of God love; nothing more. We must forgive God for loving those we cannot love, for loving us even when we did not want to be loved or think that we could be loved. We must forgive God for loving us without any precondition, preconception, or expectation. We must find a way to get around our need for just reward and allow ourselves to simply find the grace that is beyond justice, beyond our expectation, and embraces us all the same. We must find the grace extended to us and find ways to extend it to others. We must measure our goodness not by what we find forbidden, but by what we embrace, not by what we avoid and destroy but by what we create. We must forgive God for God forgiving us in the first place.

Martin Luther once wrote "Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong (sin boldly), but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign." And not just our human justice, but God's justice which pays not what is deserved, not what is earned, not what is right, but what is borne of love.

How's that for the world upside down? How's that for a punch line? May we be given the grace to even embrace the scandal of God's love, and dance in the face of Grace, no matter where it appears and no matter how faltering our steps. May we join the dance of God's love even as it unfolds around us and know fully the love of God.