

Mat 20:1-16 – “But Mine Was Harder”

In the past three years since the world economy began flushing down the hole we have seen hostilities among people increase dramatically, and even more so with the new uncertainties. I’m not just referring to the uprisings now tagged with the convenient label “Arab Spring” but to a cultural phenomenon much closer to home. Accounts of road rage gone amok are increasing in the press; there is a corrosive ramping up of vitriol on blog sites and news channels alike; even in our church courts grace often seems to be in short supply. Recently I was witness to an exchange of emails responding to a request from a significant new ministry seeking time on the agenda in one of our senior courts, and sadly observed a snowstorm of negativity subtly hiding resentment that “those people” might get something that others had not.

Grumbling and complaining about others getting something they don’t deserve is pretty common with people, and that even includes grumbling and complaining about others receiving God’s grace. Grace is that churchy term for the forgiveness that God offers us for no reason other than He wants to – other definitions include “gift of God to humankind”, and “freedom from sin.” Now you might wonder how anyone on earth could be offended by such a heavenly gift, but it seems like just about everybody on earth actually is offended by it. Apparently this is nothing new either, because even our scripture reading affirms the same surprising conclusion.

An unknown person asked Jesus the question, “Lord, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” and Jesus replied with a couple of parables – our reading is the second of these, sometimes called the parable of the generous employer. .

As is usual with parables, the elements in the story are quite normal and familiar. You may have heard of the conflicts in the south-western United States over the practice of hiring ‘illegal’ immigrants in the “day labour” market ... potential workers gather in particular spots, and employers drive up, ask for so many workers, and off they go for the day. The practice in Jesus’ day and in the parable was almost identical. Workers who wished to be hired showed up at a particular place and the vineyard owners hired them there for the day. Here the owner shows up early in the morning, finds some early birds eager to work, and puts them to work after agreeing to the amount to be paid for the day. Either because these workers are not adequately handling the harvest or more hopefully because the harvest was even more plentiful than expected, the owner returns to the job market at nine, at noon, at three, and even at five, one hour before the close of the working day. To all of them he offered a fair wage, which must have come as a blessing because the last of these had waited all day without anyone offering them a job.

So far, all is boringly normal, but at the end of the day, there comes a surprising twist, a detail that fits with Jesus’ previous statement that the last shall be first and the first shall be last, and that is the order in which the workers get paid. In good story-telling style that reverse order of payments provides the mechanism for all to see the owner’s generosity. If he had first paid off the workers who had worked all day, they surely would have taken their pay and hit the dusty road back to town, missing all that followed. Since they had to stand around and wait while the others were paid, they were witnesses to what he paid the others. Also in good story-telling style, the story skips over all the workers hired at nine, noon and so forth, moving directly from the last-hired to the first-hired.

I think we all can imagine the thoughts running through the minds of the first-hired workers. First, they would be grumbling about the unfairness of having to wait, kind of an early form of checkout lineup rage. But I’d bet that the grumbling died out fairly quickly once they saw what the latecomers were being paid, namely a full day’s pay. Surely, given human nature,

the anticipation must have built within them that they would get more than that amount. “Ooh, look at what those latecomers got paid! Because we’ve worked so much longer we’ll probably get a whole week’s wages!” It’s even likely many of those early workers would have spent – in their minds at least – the huge bonus they anticipated even before they received it.

Just as well it was only in their minds that they had spent it, because they didn’t receive it. All they got was one lousy denarius, the same as those pikers who came in at the last hour. Mumble, grumble, carp and complain. You’d have thought the paymaster had reached into their pockets and taken the bonus money from them, instead of giving them the coin that was promised. “It’s just not fair – our work was much harder!”, they protested, and we’re inclined to agree with them.

And there’s the rub, isn’t it? There’s where this story hits uncomfortably home with just about everyone, because just like the early workers, most people can’t stand to see anyone else get more than what they ‘deserve’. We have this sense of fair play, that people should be treated equitably and fairly, being rewarded appropriately for their contribution. Whether it’s wages and salaries, or cake being handed out, we have definite and fairly clear value structures defining formulas that base rewards on merit, and we get highly offended when those value systems are short-circuited.

Those of us who drive can easily think of inconsiderate and selfish people who roar up an empty curb lane and then try to bully their way into the line of those who have waited patiently. Another example is those who arrive late at the SeaBus or SkyTrain but march right up to the doors, bypassing all who have queued. Those of us who remember that queue-jumpers during the war ran the risk of being mobbed and murdered sometimes feel we are being overwhelmed by a generation raised with the rather selfish ethic of “most clever, first-served.” Our sense of injustice is inflamed when we see someone “getting away with something.”

People are so concerned with what others get that they will often take steps to make sure that nobody else gets even a fair share. A study that was done not too long ago involved the use of economic simulation games, in which a number of people interacted on computers to increase their wealth. One of the stunning results from the exercise was the discovery that the participants would, almost without exception, use up to one-quarter of the wealth they accumulated to decrease the wealth of the other players! We hate so badly to see others win that we are willing to give up something of our own to make sure they don’t.

And just as Jesus points out with this parable, we are no different when it comes to God’s grace, His forgiveness for no reason other than He chooses to offer it freely. That of course is the message of the parable, that God’s grace is available in full measure to all, to those who have laboured long and hard in the vineyard, and equally to those who have ducked in at the last minute. And we, if we are not offended ourselves by this, can at least understand that many people are indeed offended. “Our suffering was much harder than theirs! We have slogged away at this task in the burning heat”, they complain, “and you have given them the same as you give us!” The answer to the question, “are you envious because I am generous?” is, in all honesty, “YES!” not only from them but also from us. Nobody has been denied, no one cheated, no one given less than what was agreed upon. The offense lies in God’s generosity to others. The offense of grace is not in the treatment we have received, but in the observation that others are getting more than we think they deserve. The generosity of God quite often cuts across our calculations of who deserves what. For all our talk of grace, the church still has trouble with it. We still have trouble with it.

Why is that? I think there are two major reasons. First, many if not most people still have a sense that somehow we have to do something to earn God's grace, just like the unnamed person who asked the question of Jesus, "what must I do to have eternal life?" So quickly, in all corners of the church, people rush to a set of rules, to a system of rites and observances, thinking this is the way to be more acceptable to God and thus more worthy of being forgiven and being accepted. Those people who refuse to jump on whatever religious and righteous bandwagon happens to be the 'spirituality du jour' are shunned as being somehow not worthy of God's forgiveness, and the self-righteous cannot believe that those impertinent sinners could be recipients of God's grace

This parable, along with many other lessons from Jesus, speaks directly against those misunderstandings. In this parable we hear the echo of God asking, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?", and we are reminded that not only is forgiveness God's to give, but also the way to give it and to whom to give it are God's prerogatives as well. God's mercy and forgiveness are His to do with as He pleases, and we should be eternally thankful because we would not be eligible for His forgiveness otherwise. We cannot work hard enough, we cannot ever be good enough, we cannot be righteous and religious enough to begin to earn God's forgiveness, but thanks be to Him that He has in His infinite mercy offered that grace and mercy and forgiveness freely to us through His Son, Christ our Lord.

It just isn't fair! That is the scandal of the gospel: the wondrous message that God's forgiveness is freely available. God's grace is offensive because it is not fair. God's dispensing of forgiveness is not based on human rules, or human explanations, or human efforts – and thank God for that, because His forgiveness is God's alone to give, and He gives it way more freely than we could ever understand.

The other reason we have so much trouble with God's grace for others lies with ourselves. It is so difficult for us to accept that we are truly forgiven by God, and so we feel that if we cannot be forgiven then sure as heck the other guy can't be! The answer of course is not, like in the gaming experiment, to spend a fraction of our spiritual wealth decreasing the other's, but instead to hear and accept the message of grace for us. Once we can understand the magnificent depth of God's forgiveness for us, and truly accept that we are forgiven, then and only then can we find the life-giving freedom that will enable us to accept that the other person is also covered in God's grace.

So, do you find it unfair? Are you still offended by God's grace? It's really hard not to be, because we do hold a strong sense of fair play. However, the message is once again clear from this parable, and is consistent with so many other teachings of Jesus, that God's mercy and grace is boundless, offered freely to all who will listen and respond with acceptance. That God's grace follows none of our rules means not only that saints who labour in the Lord's fields day after day after long and hard year, but also that executed criminals who understand and accept in the moments before death, are covered with the same mercy and forgiveness and receive the promise of being with Jesus in paradise. It's just not fair by our rules, perhaps, but it is the greatest of all mercies and blessings, for it means that even we are acceptable in God's sight, and forgiven, and brought into the kingdom through his Son, Jesus Christ. All thanks be to God, for in His mercy we too have been forgiven, for no reason other than in His grace he has chosen to forgive us.