

Mat 20:1-16 – “Offended By Grace”

One of the many tiny joys I have in ministry is choosing the sermon title. I’ve always had a bit of fun with it, and here at Central there’s some direct feedback because of our sign out front. From my office I can see people’s reactions when they read the current sermon title. I’m not sure if the sign, or the sermon titles can take credit for any of the newcomers, but I have watched many strangers pause momentarily, and occasionally even lift an eyebrow.

With this week’s crazy schedule I haven’t had time to see if I got any reactions. We don’t have anybody here named Grace, but the confusion with that name might have raised an eyebrow or two, since not everyone is familiar with the churchy term ‘grace’. That is a theological technical term, referring to the forgiveness that God offers us for no reason other than He wants to. I suspect that even though most people are familiar with the song ‘Amazing Grace’, they may not have connected the title with the words.

A search in the computerized Encarta dictionary provides two particularly relevant definitions: “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 He 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. In France, in Chile, in the Okanagan when grapes come ripe and are at their prime extra workers are needed to harvest them quickly. 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, and finds some early birds eager to work, and he puts them to work after agreeing to the amount to be paid for the day. Possibly, because these workers are not 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 day. To 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 jolt. Now there is no evidence that historically payments were made starting with the last, but the detail here fits with Jesus’ previous statement that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Not only that, but in good story-telling style this 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 having to wait, kind of an early form of bank-lineup-rage. But I’ll bet though 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 they got paid! We'll probably get a whole week's wages!" Like many of us, 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 not fair!", 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, we can't stand to see anyone else get what we feel they don't 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 sets of value structures that define formulas that base rewards on some kind of merit, and we get highly offended when those value systems are short-circuited.

Anyone who commutes can recall many personal examples, recalling inconsiderate and selfish people who either roar up an empty curb lane and then try to bully their way into the line of those who have waited patiently, or those who arrive late at the SeaBus 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 even take steps to make sure that nobody else gets 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 how many are offended. "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!" from them and 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 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. 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. 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 see how those impertinent sinners could be recipients of God's grace until they conform. This parable, and many other lessons from Jesus speak directly against such 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 the forgiveness His 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, be good enough, 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. 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, are you still offended by 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 that not only saints who labour in the Lord's fields day after day after long and hard year, but also executed criminals who understand and accept in the moments before death, are covered with the same mercy and forgiveness. It's 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.

Once we begin to understand that, and accept it, it is time to stop being offended, give thanks, and live in ways pleasing to God as a way of thanksgiving. But that's another sermon, another day. In the meantime, give thanks to God, for in His mercy you have been forgiven, for no reason other than in His grace he has chosen to forgive you.