

WPC
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Gracious Love
Matthew 20:1-16

On the first day of class the professor says, "Now students, I have this complicated, very complicated, math problem, the solution to which shall constitute your entire grade for the semester. I'm going ahead and giving you this problem here at the beginning of the semester so you can start work immediately, and I do urge you to begin immediately. I want you all to make A's in this class."

Well, you want to do well. So you get the problem and, first week of the class, go to work. You go to the library. You search for helpful books. You begin your calculations.

To your surprise as the semester moves along, you note that even by mid-February only a few of your fellow classmates have begun work on the problem. Well, tough luck for them. That's their problem. They'll be sorry come May. You've been at work on this problem since the second week of January.

The week before exams you're proudly putting the finishing touches on your paper. Before the class starts, you mention to some of your classmates that you've been hard at work all semester, and you find out that

for various reasons (illness, family emergencies, laziness) some of them haven't even begun. Some in the class tell you that if they stay up for the next 48 hours, maybe they might be able to almost get it finished. There are others who haven't even started work at all. Well, that's tough. That's their problem.

Then comes the last day of the semester. After all your work, you proudly hand in your work to the professor. To your shock, everyone else in the class also hands in their work. How did they do it? You're about to find out.

"Professor Smith, thanks for helping me figure this out last week. Why, without your help, I would never have gotten it finished..." you overhear one to say.

"Well, here it is, Professor Smith. All done, thanks to your kind assistance yesterday," says another.

"Thanks for coming by the dorm last night," says another.

You're aghast. No wonder they finished their work. While you were hard at work from the beginning of the term, figuring it out on your own, this professor has been all over the campus spoon-feeding it to everybody in the class, everybody but you, that is.

When you tell Professor Smith what you think of it, she says, "Why do you begrudge my generosity? Didn't I say that the goal of the class was to get people to finish the problem, to make an A? You were able to finish it on your own. That's great. The others needed a little special attention. You got an A. They got an A. What's wrong with that? Am I not doing you right?"

Somehow, it just doesn't feel right. You look at your A. It was what you wanted out of the class. But now that everyone else also has an A, what with Professor Smith's midnight forays into the dorm and everything, it doesn't feel like an A.

Isn't it odd how the professor's graciousness doesn't quite feel like graciousness?¹

Barbara Brown Taylor thinks that the parable of the laborers in the vineyard is a little like cod liver oil: "you know Jesus is right; you know it must be good for you, but that doesn't make it any easier to swallow. This parable is one of those stories of forgiveness so radical that it offends, because it seems to reward those who have done the least while it sends those who have worked the hardest to the end of the line." (Taylor, Seeds of Heaven, 73).

¹ William Willimon, "The Invitation," 30 Good minutes, Oct. 18, 1992, http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/willimon_3603.htm

What do we make of what Jesus is saying? It's helpful to look at the context of this passage in Matthew 20. In the previous chapter, Peter had just asked Jesus what he and the other disciples can expect in reward for their loyalty to Jesus. Since they've given up everything to follow him, what will he give them in return? Jesus promises them 12 thrones in heaven. But there's a catch: "many that are first will be last," he says, "and the last first." Then he tells the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

That's what happens before the story. What happens after is that James' and John's mother comes up to Jesus and makes a special request, asking Jesus to give her two sons the best thrones in the kingdom, one on his left and one on his right. Jesus replies that's not his decision to make.

It's helpful to see that before and after this parable, Jesus' own disciples are jockeying for position, competing for the best seats in the house, each of them trying to be first in line when the doors are opened.

Have you ever done that? I remember back in 1977 when I was in jr. high and "Star Wars" first came out. It was the first time I ever experienced waiting in a huge line for a blockbuster. The lines snaked around the block all summer. People waited for hours to see this film. Even though I saw "Star Wars" 5 or 6 times, I never arrived early enough to be at the front of the line, but that's where everyone wanted to be. It was the best place to be,

because then you were the first inside, you were able to pick the best seats, you were able to experience the blast of icy theater air first, before everyone else.

Now imagine how disheartening it would have been if you had arrived hours early, you had endured the summer heat for the whole day, and the manager of the theater came outside and reversed the order, telling those at the front of the line to stay put while he invited those at the end of the line to enter the theater first. Even though everyone in line would eventually get in to see the movie, there would be a huge outcry, because it would be so tremendously unfair. Those at the front of the line earned their reward. On what grounds would anyone dare reverse the order?

The landowner in today's story just feels like being generous. It's his vineyard, and he can do whatever he wants with it. And what he wants is to let the last be first and the first last. Notice, everyone gets paid, but the order is reversed.

The landowner is the one who takes the initiative to go out early in the morning to find and hire those without steady work for his vineyard. He makes an agreement with the first group of laborers he hires to pay them each the usual daily wage, which is just enough to support one's family for a day.

This landowner then goes out again at nine, noon, and three o'clock. Kenneth Bailey notes that he finds the unemployed *standing*, not sitting. "They are alert and eager, still hopeful that they will be chosen by someone - anyone. Those who stand have a better chance of being hired." He hires more workers at each of the different times, but notice that instead of quoting a pay scale, he says only, "I will pay you what is right." Finally, one hour before sundown, at five o'clock, the master returns to the market for the last time, where he finds other unemployed people who have been *standing all day*.

Instead of facing the humiliation of returning home to anxious and hungry family members with the bad news of another day of frustration and disappointment, they had continued to stand in the marketplace, hoping against hope to find work. So when the landowner asks them, "Why are you **standing** here idle all day?" their answer is simple, "Because no one has hired us." A normal employer might reply, "Well that's tough luck." But this is no normal employer. He says to them, "I can use you. You also go into the vineyard." Notice, he doesn't even promise them any kind of payment. These last workers accompany him because they trust him.

At the end of the day, he pays every one of his workers the same amount, a full day's wage, because he knows that many of them have

families to support. They wouldn't be able to care for them if they were paid for just a few hours. Throughout the story, then, the landowner shows great concern and compassion towards all of the laborers and their families.

But when those who were hired first get paid, they grumble because in spite of working hard all day in the scorching sun, they receive the same wages as those who only worked one hour.

That's when the landowner reminds them that he's kept his part of the bargain. It's not their business what he pays the others. "Or do you," he says, "begrudge my generosity?"

"You bet they do. Like most human beings, they have an innate sense of what is fair and what is not. Equal pay for equal work is fair; equal pay for unequal work is not fair. Life is so often not fair, which is why it seems all that much more important that God should be." (Taylor, 77).

But God is not fair. God engages in exorbitant economics, because "he's like a woman who tears her living room apart until she finds her stray quarter, like a father who plows ten grand into a welcome-home party for a prodigal, a shepherd called 'good' for his willingness to lay down his life for a \$3.95-plus-postage sheep." (William Willimon) And he pays people beginning at the end of the line.

Taylor says, “The curious thing about this parable for me is where we locate ourselves in line. The story sounds quite different from the end of the line, after all, than it does from the front of the line, but isn’t it interesting that 99% of us hear it from front row seats? *We* are the ones who have gotten the short end of the stick; *we* are the ones who have been gyped. We are the ones who have gotten up early and worked hard and stayed late and all for what? So that some backward householder can come along and start at the wrong end of the line, treating us just like the ne’er do wells who do not even get dressed until noon! That’s how most of us hear the parable, but it is entirely possible that we are mistaken about where we are in line.”

(Taylor, 78)

It’s entirely possible that, as far as God is concerned, we’re halfway around the block and can’t even see the front of the line. Most of us tend, instinctively, to identify with the all day workers, those who worked the entire day in the dusty, sticky vineyard in the hot sun. We see ourselves, by and large, as deserving of God's favor. But what if that’s not the case? What if, from God's point-of-view, we’re the latecomers? In fact, that’s exactly who we are. "All have sinned," wrote the Apostle Paul, "and all have fallen short of the glory of God." As Tony Robinson notes, “There are no righteous, deserving all-day workers in God's kingdom, only latecomers,

only sinners in need of grace. How do we respond to God's unfairness, God's generosity, when we locate ourselves at the back of the line? It will change the way we think about our labor in the vineyard."²

Are we working in the vineyard strictly for our reward, or are we there working for, and with, the owner of the vineyard? Do we begrudge God's generosity? If so, it's only because we've forgotten where we stand in line.

How can we live our lives in joy and accept God's grace? By remembering that our sheer existence is a windfall. We had no more way of giving ourselves life than those day laborers had ways to make work. Our lives have been given to us as an incredible gift. When we remember that fact, then we can begin to be generous with our lives exactly as God has been generous with his life.

John Claypool tells of an old rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and he taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm and when the father died, they had found their working together so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. So each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest season, they

² Tony Robinson, Weekly Reading, Sept. 12, 2011, <http://www.anthonbrobinson.com/reading.htm>

would divide equally what they had corporately produced. Across the years the elder brother never married, stayed an old bachelor. The younger brother did marry and had eight wonderful children. Some years later when they were having a wonderful harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of his harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he is already asleep, I'll take some of what I have put in my barn and I'll slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children.

At the very time he was thinking down that line, the younger brother was thinking to himself, "God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn't been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He's much too fair. He'll never renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over into his barn." And so one night when the moon was full, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity.

The old rabbi said that even though there wasn't a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God weeping for joy because two of his children had gotten the point. Two of his children had

come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy and because we are made in God's image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well. Life is not fair, thank God! It's not fair because it's rooted in grace.³ Amen.

³ John Claypool, "Life isn't fair, thank God!" 30 Good Minutes, 1-30-00, http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/claypool_4317.htm