

September 24, 2017: Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 20:1-16: Grace

We have all heard it before. Someone older than us will begin a statement with, “When I was your age...” and proceed to tell us how much harder their life was than ours. I remember watching a commercial once where a grandfather was talking to his grandson about how tough he had it, saying things like “When I was your age I had to walk three miles to school, in the snow, barefoot, uphill, both ways.” It would make some people laugh. Not me. It hit too close to home. That was my grandfather.

He did have a tough life. Way tougher than mine. His father died when he was four. His younger brother died when he was eight. He lived on a farm with his mother and sister and his maternal grandfather, who was verbally and physically abusive when he drank too much, which was often. He had to quit school after eighth grade to work and support his family. And of course he lived through the depression.

People say that grandparents are supposed to spoil their grandchildren. In hindsight, I can see that my grandfather did. But not at the time. I grew up believing that my grandfather had one goal in life when it came to his grandchildren, and that was to teach them the value of hard work, that if you work hard you will be rewarded. He had plenty of work to go around.

I remember one time when I was very young, maybe about seven or eight, he asked my brother and me and rake his leaves. He had a fairly good sized yard, with several mature trees. So it was a big job. We spent hours raking the leaves into long rows. Then we took this machine he had called a Billy Goat, that was basically like a huge gas-powered, vacuum cleaner, sucked up all the leaves, and put them in piles along the road, where the city would come and haul them off.

When we finally finished, we came inside and sat down on the couch, exhausted. He told us how proud he was, then gave us each fifty cents. He had a very different idea of “reward” than we did. So now I find myself saying to my kids, when their grandparents pay them to do something. “When I was your age...”

He really was bound and determined to teach us this lesson, the value of hard work. And he taught it to us over, and over, and over again. It was tough to learn, but at the same time, it just made sense. It just seemed fair. But there was this one exception.

My grandfather had already retired from the construction business when I came along, but he had a demolition business he was still running. He had a contract with the city where he lived to demolish run down homes of people who died with no next-of-kin. One home he was hired to tear down was owned by a guy who had repaired vending machines for a living. So his home and two large out-buildings were full of them.

My grandfather was in the process of picking up part of one of the outbuildings with a large piece of equipment to move it into a dump truck when quarters just started falling out. He realized that some of the vending machines still had money in them. So the next day he took my brother and I out and let us go through the remaining machines before he demolished the rest of the house.

We worked for a few hours, using pry bars and screw drivers, and whatever else we could find to open every machine we could get to. It was hard work, but fun work. We went back to his house and dumped out our buckets full of quarters, nickels, and dimes, and started counting. By the time we were done we had roughly \$120 in change. We were excited. But not for long. After we told him the total, he started figuring out loud. "So let's see, \$120, split three ways, comes out to \$40 apiece." At first we thought he was taking a finder's fee for himself, which seemed kind of cheap, but fair, but then he explained that our little sister was the recipient of the other third.

We were not happy with this. She had done absolutely nothing. While we were working away she was relaxing at my grandparent's house, playing with dolls and watching *Oklahoma* with my grandmother, which was sort of like work, but not quite. This didn't make any sense at all. It flew in the face of what my grandfather had been trying to teach us. If you work, you get rewarded. If you don't work, you get nothing. Apparently not this time.

We really didn't expect this from my grandfather, the man who had to walk to school, three miles, in the snow, barefoot, uphill in both directions. I imagine the way my brother and I felt that day was similar to the way the disciples felt after hearing this parable.

Jesus was telling another parable to help his disciples get a clearer picture of who God is, and what his Kingdom is like. The scene he describes reminds me of something I once saw in San Diego. We were there visiting some family that lived there at the time. We were driving through town early one morning and I noticed large groups of men, congregating outside the local hardware stores, like Home Depot and Lowes. These men had driven up from Mexico with the hopes that someone would hire them to work that day.

This is similar to what day laborers would do in Jesus' day. Early every morning they would gather in the marketplace and hope that some wealthy landowner would come hire them for the day to work in his fields. Whatever they earned that day would buy their food for the next.

You heard the parable. The landowner came to the marketplace one morning, maybe around six or seven o'clock, and hired several men to work in his vineyard. They agreed on the standard daily wage and went with him. A few hours later, at 9 o'clock, he returned, found a few laborers who had not yet found work, and hired them to work in his vineyard, promising to pay them whatever was right. They agreed. This continued for the rest of the day. The landowner returned to the marketplace again at noon, at 3 o'clock, and then at 5 o'clock, just an hour before the end of the work day, each time hiring additional workers for his vineyard.

Around 6 o'clock that evening he called all the workers in for the field and began to give them their pay, starting with those who had gotten there last. To each of them he gave the usual daily wage. Presumably he did the same for all the others. By the time those who had gotten there at the very beginning of the day were getting their pay, they had noticed what they others had gotten, so naturally they were expecting more. You would too. Even if you didn't have a grandfather like mine, you would expect to make more money for working more hours, and for working during the hottest part of the day. But they didn't. It wasn't fair. And even worse, it portrayed God as someone who was not fair.

This parable would have floored Jesus' disciples, just as it does us. It doesn't make any sense. It goes completely against our concept of fairness, and right and wrong. It's a slap on the face of all the lessons our grandparents and parents, tried to teach us. But that was kind of the point. Jesus was talking about grace. And grace doesn't make sense. And grace is certainly not fair. And that's a good thing...because if it was about being fair, none of us would get it.

A popular definition for grace is divine, unmerited favor. Divine means it comes from God. Unmerited is just another word for unearned, or undeserved. And favor is God giving his approval of us, or accepting us. One of our fundamental doctrines as Protestants is the belief that we are saved by grace, through faith. I imagine every single person here this morning would affirm that. But we don't always live in a way that says we really believe it.

We sometimes approach following Jesus as if we were punching a time clock. We act as if God were keeping score, keeping track of how many religious Facebook posts we "like" or "share," or taking attendance on Sunday mornings, or heaven help us, Wednesday nights. A lot of us would be in trouble then. Because of this, we expect to receive more from God than say, someone else, who doesn't work as hard at this following Jesus thing as we do. We become judgmental, or bitter, or angry...following Jesus becomes a burden, and not the unmatched source of joy and comfort and hope that it is meant to be.

We need to be reminded, that the grace we have received from God is not a payment for all our hard work. We didn't earn it. We couldn't if we wanted to. It is a gift, pure and simple, given freely from a God who is exceedingly generous. All we did was open our hands and our hearts to receive it. That's true of every single believer. In this respect, all followers of Jesus are equal. There is no hierarchy in heaven. No first. No last. In God's eyes, every one of us, from the best, to the worst, was worth dying for.

My grandfather wasn't contradicting his lesson on the value of hard work when he made us share the money from the vending machines with our sister. Neither was Jesus. My grandfather was just trying to teach a different lesson, that he loved all of his grandchildren the same, whether they worked hard or not, no matter what they did. He proved it when I got my ear pierced. That's really the same lesson Jesus was trying to teach his disciples. We are all the objects of his affection.

If we really take this to heart, we will act so differently toward one another. We will be so much more kind, more patient, more loving. Our work for God would flow out of gratitude, instead of obligation. Our attitude would be so different. We wouldn't do things because we had to, but because we wanted to. We would derive so much joy from following Jesus, nonbelievers would wonder what they were missing.

One of the dangers of a message like this one is that it leads people to wonder if there is any value in work. If we're all going to get the same thing, why bother? If I can pray a prayer on my deathbed and still make it to heaven, why should I forgo the pleasures of this life until then? You may not have the luxury of seeing your death coming, you don't know when the sun will set on your life, but even if you did, you've still cheated yourself out of the best life to have on earth.

Those laborers who started at the beginning of the day did receive some additional benefit...

They did not have to spend any of the day wondering if they were going to have money to buy food tomorrow.

They did not have to spend any part of the day standing idly in the marketplace having people walk by and think less than flattering things about them...that they were lazy, worthless, or no good.

They did not have to spend any part feeling like a failure, as if they had failed to do what was necessary to support their family

In the same way, those individuals who enter into a relationship with God sooner, rather than later, do receive certain benefits...

They do not have to worry whether they will have time to get right with God if death comes without warning

They do not have to live under the burden of sin, or suffer from unnecessary consequences of their own sin

They don't have to live wondering if they are loved or accepted

They don't have to live wondering if they are loved or accepted

They do not have to live as people with no hope

They do not have to live as people who have no sense of purpose in their lives, or wonder if their lives have meaning.

I want to leave you with two questions to think about...

Why are you serving God? Out of gratitude with a heart full of thanksgiving? Or out of obligation, believing that your hard work is going to earn you something.

If you are not already serving God, and following him, why wait until the end of the day to enter into the Kingdom, when you have already received the invitation.