

Message: “Is Grace Fair?”

When I was a child, I learned an important lesson. If your household was like mine, there’d always be a squabble when we got to the last piece of food on the plate. This was especially true when it was a piece of pie. We all wanted the last piece. It led to a lot of arguments.

What could we do? In our home, my parents sat us down and then said, “One of you gets to cut the pie; the others get first choice.” The only way to get a fair portion was to share fairly with the others.

Did you get this lesson, too? It applies to most things in life. When you share, you won’t get as large a portion, but you’ll be in harmony and unity with other people. Everyone is a stakeholder this way. This way of thinking and living benefits us all.

But, for some of us, this just doesn’t seem quite right. And when we consider Jesus’ parable of the landowner and the workers, it just doesn’t seem fair. We get the idea of grace in theory, but struggle with how it works in practice.

This leads to the question, “Is grace fair?” So let’s reflect on the uncommon nature of grace during our time together by looking at our scripture, Matthew 20:1-16. It’s helpful to know the background before we look at the narrative. Jesus and the disciples are only days away from Jerusalem, which he will enter for the last time.

Jesus has been spending time with the disciples, preparing them for what is to come. He tells the disciples parables and gives illustrations to help them understand something they aren’t yet equipped to understand. God’s kingdom isn’t what we expect. It doesn’t follow our worldly rules. We need help to grasp this so we can learn to live another way, a life-giving way, and then pass this on.

They’re just coming from an encounter with a rich young person. Based on appearances, this person should have been the perfect disciple. They had wealth and lived by Mosaic Law. But Jesus saw right to the heart of the matter. This promising person didn’t put God first in their life. They were distracted by other interests and unwilling to change. This concerned the disciples, as they worried who could pass such a high bar for entry into the kingdom of God.

Hearing their concerns and knowing what's coming in Jerusalem, Jesus tells the disciples about life in the kingdom of God. He's casting a vision for all people which they can then share with people of all tribes and nations, the people of Israel and the Gentiles. And Jesus uses a topic which is just as relevant today as it was then: work.

Jesus speaks about the work of skilled laborers, people who work with their hands. For those of us in the West, this often calls to mind images of migrant farm workers or the folks you may see at factories or outside home improvement stores. Let me pause here for a moment.

I don't believe this as a blue collar-white collar story as much as a story reflecting Jesus' community. In the first century, people lived hand-to-mouth. This means you had to work to eat. Everyone grew food, raised animals or, if they were lucky, learned a craft. Jesus learned carpentry from Joseph. This was most likely the family trade.

Because so many people lived near or below the poverty line, they relied on barter systems, trading work for goods. And, in this case, they traded a day's work for a Roman denarius. A denarius is what a Roman soldier received for a day's service. It was enough to cover the expenses of a household for maybe 2-3 days. This varied depending on how good the economy was and inflation. We have some of the same factors and conditions today – people living in or near poverty, inflation and underemployment. The privileged still benefit.¹ Back to the story...

Dealing with money and privilege is difficult, so we traditionally turn to the gift of eternal life as the wage in this parable. We see this as God's grace-gift, given to all who believe, no matter whether they come to salvation and the work of making disciples early in life or late. While there is truth here, I believe there's a deeper shift called for.

Jesus is telling us we need to shift our perspective to understand life now and life in the kingdom of God. The way we find merit isn't the way God sees merit. Rather than defining our value and worth by merit as we do in this world, our true value and worth is defined in the light of God's uncommon grace. This gives us hope, no matter what our situation or circumstance may be.

¹ Material drawn from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denarius>

Jesus is calling us to be instruments of grace to a world hungry and thirsty for life. We are to be instruments of grace to a world struggling with poverty and injustice. To do so, we need to realize God gives grace before we even know what we're receiving. God initiates. Our part is to accept and pass on what we receive, hopefully with joy.

The way we view grace affects the way we respond, how we accept and share it with our neighbors. This sounds good. We know the greatest commandments, love God and love our neighbor. We're ready to go. There's only one problem: depending on who we are and what our life experience is, we're probably hearing and responding to Jesus' parable in different ways.

Years ago, an African colleague shared a different story about a dinner table. Each day, the parents put what they had to offer their seven children on a plate. The parents ate a small amount, as did the older children. By the time the plate came to the 5th child, there were only crumbs, which they ate. The 6th child licked the plate clean and then passed it to the 7th child, who licked the plate again. When asked why they licked the plate, the 7th child said, "For the flavor and the hope of a full plate one day." This is the hope God's uncommon grace offers.

What kind of shift do we need to make? When this parable is read in Western churches, a common reaction may be that the whole thing is unfair. We may identify with the landowner, who is God. It doesn't seem right for people who worked more hours to be paid the same as people who only worked a little while. This seems unjust in western society. We may say we've worked hard to get what we have, and life isn't easy. We may explain it by saying God's grace is above justice. It's difficult for us to realize we're the first, the privileged, in the lesson.

In contrast, when the parable is read in poorer churches, those in the Southern hemisphere, people immediately identify with the laborers. They understand the situation of a person who must go to a place where someone may come and hire them. They may be lucky one day and find a whole day's work. Other days, they may spend hours waiting, and find no work or only a few hours' work. These brothers and sisters clearly understand. They've experienced waiting for work and they know the conversation with the landowner at day's end.

The ending still surprises: those who were last to the job are given a whole day's wage. The response of some congregations to the scene may be confusion. Yet poor congregations respond with joy and celebration. They see the landowner showing a different kind of justice. Everyone celebrates when someone finds work. This gives life to the community. And they recognize the needs of one person, one household are reflected in their own needs and the needs of their home. This makes them all more whole.

Those hired at five o'clock weren't at fault because they didn't find work earlier. They were waiting all day, hoping someone would hire them. In a very real sense, they had more hope and perseverance than those hired earlier. Waiting was their work. More important, they still need to eat and provide for their family. All the workers need a day's wages to survive, not just a few.

The landowner isn't showing grace which goes against justice, but grace which understands justice at a deeper level than we usually encounter or consider. This is the gift of a new reading from the perspective of those who were last. The landowner pays those who were last what they needed and what they justly deserved, not what society, with its consumer view of justice, would pay them. Common grace and justice would have us wash our hands of any responsibility for those who don't find enough work to earn a living. The landowner, following uncommon grace and justice, pays them what they need and what they were ready to earn if they'd been hired earlier.

The traditional reading leads to the response of those hired early in the day: they worked a full day, earned their day's wage and yet somehow deserved more than the rest. The less fortunate did not deserve a full day's wage. They may need it, but they haven't earned it and shouldn't be paid for work they didn't do. They don't merit the pay and aren't as valuable as the workers who came before; otherwise, they would have been hired earlier. Sound familiar?

What we forget, and what the first laborers forgot, is we can work and make a living because we're privileged. Sadly, the world today is much the same as it was then. We are ready to limit justice to benefit ourselves and others like us, justified by our efforts and who we are.

We may find value in what we do, but not in others or what they do.

We can find ourselves callously arguing everyone has to fend for themselves, which is the “dog-eat-dog” view. If we’re more sensitive, we may try to use some of our resources to help in a charitable way, which is good. We can do more, including using the systems of privilege to create opportunity and equality for others, and then dismantling those systems of privilege.

The situation at our borders and other borders around the world is an example of our false sense of justice. Forgive me if I’m being insensitive, but the Spirit is clearly speaking to my heart about Jesus’ uncommon grace and our borders. I’ve seen the border community when it was different. We traveled to Juarez on several occasions when I was young. Back then, you could easily walk or drive across and no passport was required. People commuted from both sides of the border to work. The community wasn’t divided. There was harmony.

Today, our borders look like an armed camp. We detain families. We’ve separated children from their parents. Everyone is viewed with suspicion. Barbed wire is cruel. Adults, parents and children are fleeing crime, violence and oppression, only to end up dying in the river and the desert because we reject them. Worse, the communities are divided. This is unsustainable, unjust and unhealthy.

Rev. Justo González, an advocate for justice, tells us not to miss the point of the parable: it doesn’t speak of God’s grace as “the opposite of justice, but rather a higher and more loving understanding of justice.”²

What if, instead of rejecting and isolating people, we welcomed and rejoiced in their arrival at our borders? What if we celebrated the exhausting work they’ve done to travel hundreds of miles, leaving friends, family and belongings behind in hopes of finding a place where they could raise their children and be a community? What if ALL Americans, no matter where we live, invited those who arrived to come and live in our states, cities and neighborhoods, helping with the transition, offering uncommon grace? I believe Jesus would smile and the Spirit would be hard at work making it happen.

² *González, Justo. Santa Biblia. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, p. 64*

Poverty is a reality of life for many people, locally and across the globe. We must beware for the western world has become too complacent with our understanding of God's grace. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, not love our neighbors so long as they're like us.

Jesus calls us to live a changed life by God's uncommon grace, not according to the ways of western society by which we are privileged through power, wealth, status and position. Jesus doesn't offer a message of privilege and reward based on merit. Jesus calls us to give up whatever we idolize and serve others, seeking to see with fresh eyes, a renewed mind and active, caring hands.

I pray we follow Jesus on this path, sharing the grace we receive, freely and willingly, with faith, hope and love.

Let us pray ...

Matthew 20:1-16 (CEB)

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard.

“Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ And they went.

“Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’

“‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied.

“He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ‘These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’

“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”