

Matthew 20:1-19
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“I’m all for equality, but...”

When I talked with the children this morning I asked them if they knew what it meant to “pay your dues.” I’ve been on a lot of sports teams and I know what it’s like to spend all those hours of training. And yes, there were new kids on the block who got on teams and started in – seemingly without paying their dues. Obviously the coaches knew something we didn’t

I was an exchange student for the first half of my senior year in high school. I’d played volleyball back home so decided to join the team in Wisconsin, too. I practiced and drilled with the team but got cut when the final judgment came down. It was quite a blow. What got to me the most was that the foreign exchange student, who really couldn’t hit the ball in my opinion, got to stay. I’m all for equality but, c’mon! I had experience! I was a senior!

How many of us have had similar experiences? Maybe at work, or in a club you belong to, or a team you play on? The new person gets all the kudos and attention just for being there. Meanwhile, you’ve been keeping your nose to the grindstone and get no recognition at all!

A minister once confided, "I admit there are some parts of Jesus' teachings that don't seem fair. I understand that they tell about God's grace and forgiveness and all, but frankly, I don't like them." (Kristen Swenson)

The parable in Matthew is one of those teachings, as is the story of the Prodigal Son. The carefree, irresponsible one gets a big party while the conscientious, hard-worker gets left wondering, “Why bother?” These lessons are both double-edged swords. One conclusion might be that, according to God, you’re in whether you’ve been on the team the whole time or just came in for the last inning.

What kind of message is that for people who seek to live faithful lives? What does it matter then, if we work hard, pay attention to our family, and contribute to the community and to society? Is Jesus giving permission to just go off and do what we feel like? No worries...let God do the sorting out. In the end, the reward will feel truly undeserved indeed.

At the heart of the gospel lesson is the message of Grace. Some of us recognize it, have experienced it and know it for the true gift it is. But some of us don’t. Maybe because we are like those latecomers into the vineyard...we’ve never had the experience of getting paid what others have been paid. And we’ve never been first in line to receive *anything*.

What is grace? Frederic Buechner tells us that “Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. . . Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever *tried* to love somebody?

A crucial eccentricity of Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing *you* have to do. There's nothing you *have* to do. There's nothing you have to *do*.

The grace of God means something like this: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it." (pp. 38-39, *Wishful Thinking*)

For many years I've been a spiritual director on three-day retreats sponsored by the Methodist churches in Long Island. During these three days, people taking part are served by a team of volunteers who provide wonderful home-cooked meals, thoughtful cards and gifts, and hours and hours of prayer for each individual. At some point during the weekend, people begin to feel and recognize an unconditional love that is coming to them from God through the team.

It is an unforgettable realization to know that no matter what you have done, or who you are, or where you are on your faith journey, God has always been reaching out a hand to you. You've just needed to offer your hand to God. It is very humbling – and uplifting at the same time.

Matthew was aiming directly at his first-century church community when he re-told this parable from Jesus. So many of them had "been on the team" since the beginning, maybe had relatives themselves who followed Jesus. They had an "in with God" attitude – like those laborers who started out the day knowing what to expect from the landowner. Newcomers to the community, especially those who were on fire to do the work of the church, got looked down upon. They were either resented or seen as overzealous. Nothing like a convert to show us our own complacency of faith!

The comparison probably didn't sit any better with them than it does with us. But it's the more subtle message here that is crucial. Sometimes we have to see, and maybe even resent, what others have, to recognize what is our already. Because, while we toil away in the vineyard, so to speak, it is easy to lose sight of whom we are serving. We tend to forget that we know our "day's wages." In other words, we've always had access to God's grace. It's been here all along. We have to remember to reach out and receive it. That, my friends, is all that matters to God.

This story may help us understand why...

There was a talented and gifted artist who created beautiful and diverse works - some of them on a scale beyond our imagination. This artist was full of love and wonder but was missing something in life...a companion. So the artist sought for a companion but nothing could speak or help continue with creation or, most of all, love back.

The artist thought and thought and finally was able to create someone to partner with. The relationship, at first, was paradise. But it did not remain idyllic. Though the artist offered a

deep, abiding love, the companion was easily distracted and became forgetful of the artist. Enough so that there were many times the artist was left alone while the companion wandered off in search of greener pastures and self-indulgences.

Throughout the companion's many affairs of the heart the artist remained faithful. To this day, that artist still loves the wandering partner, and hasn't given up yet.

The artist is God - our Creator. We, you and I, are that wandering partner.

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