

**A COPERNICAN REVOLUTION OF FAITH; MATTHEW 20:1-16; SEPTEMBER 24, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

What would it take to build a new world? A new society and nation? A new church? Matthew answers that question today by exposing the shortcomings of the foundation of the present world and he reveals what serves as the simple, surprising strength of the new community, God's community.

What we have today is a confrontation, if you will, between the 'good citizen' and the 'good Christian.' How can those two be in conflict, you ask. Easy – they are based on completely opposite systems of value and reward.

The good citizen contributes to the life of the community out of a sense of duty, obligation, doing what is right, sharing from her abundance, making the community stronger and the world a better place. What's wrong with those motivations? Nothing. It is the system of reward that underlies them that is in conflict with today's parable.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard comes at the end of a long section of teachings that precede Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He is preparing his disciples for the adversity they are soon to face; Matthew's audience is his Jerusalem church, Jews drawn to the teachings of Jesus and the life of discipleship.

Both Jesus and Matthew have good reason to tell this parable to their respective listeners just as we, a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian community, have good reason to hear again the message of grace in this ancient story.

Survey's indicate that America's favorite hymn is "Amazing Grace."

There may be no more cherished word in the Christian vocabulary. Sayings like, 'there but for the grace of God go I' remind us of our good fortune. A 'gracious' person is someone who is generous, kind, and understanding. But today's story puts grace under the spotlight of an everyday situation that could just as easily take place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the 1<sup>st</sup>, people being paid an agreed upon wage for their labor.

I don't need to retell the parable. It's what our deal-making president would call a bad deal. Jesus sums up the message of the story at the end when he says, "the last shall be first and the first shall be last." While the parable leaves a kind of stinging sensation we've found ways to smooth it over and tame its kick in popular culture.

The saying is often invoked at church dinners when the pastor tells the tables furthest from the buffet that they may go first. It has attained a kind of old school gentlemanly aura about it; men holding the door for women; family holding back to make sure guests have enough food; situations where those who enjoy clear advantage or abundance would almost appear greedy were they to be first in line, enter a building ahead of someone older or infirm, or push aside children at a parade.

What I'm saying is that the popular definition of the 'first shall be last and the last shall be first' has little to do with Jesus' definition. Remember it took the courage of a Rosa Parks to redefine the meaning of that phrase on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955.

Jesus' idea of grace – as shown to the workers who showed up at the end of the day and received the same wage as those who got up when it was still dark, packed their lunch and arrived a few minutes early to work – Jesus' idea of this 'across-the-board –reward' would undermine our present economic system.

What would motivate people to work harder, longer, smarter if they knew they were going to be paid the same amount at the end of the day as those who slept in and got to work late?

The genius of the parable is its setting in a common economic transaction. 'Show me how you spend your money and I'll show you what you value' the old saying goes. So here, when money is involved true colors are on display. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard strips away the pretense and niceties with which we dull and make irrelevant the cutting edge and liberating power of God's grace.

Divine grace does not rest on the merit system. And because it doesn't, those who came to work early – disciples who trod the road with Jesus; Jews – God's chosen people; long time third, fourth generation church members – those of us who are insiders by whatever definition are prone to grumble at this parable's value system.

We wonder if grace doesn't undermine the whole reason for being good, for observing standards, keeping rules, and living justly. We second guess and critique a Messiah who tells such a parable as unrealistic and unfair.

We could support the owner's generosity if the groups of workers that came after noon had merely been delayed, if the truck that brought them to the fields had broken down. But the owner's actions are not the sign of a little generosity to an unfortunate few. They call for a completely different way of seeing God.

If the relationship between the first workers and the owner of the vineyard are strained what about the first workers and those who came late in the day?

The former group clearly expresses their discontent: "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us." They are envious of the generosity shown the others. Presumably, they'd have been overjoyed were they the recipients of the owner's generous equal pay had they been the latecomers. What they cannot abide is the beneficence that puts the latecomers on a par with them. The grumblers are not really against grace; they are against grace shown to others and what that implies.

It is a familiar and old story: Jonah on the brow of a hill outside of Nineveh pouting when God spares the city; the elder brother who harbors hostility for his father when his prodigal brother returns home and is celebrated; the Pharisee at prayer thanking God he is not like the sinful tax collector. What the parable refutes and discards like a parasite on our soul is grace that is cheap and sentimental and keeps the old system of privilege intact. That's hard to stomach when we've bought into and labored under the old merit system and want reward for our loyalty and fairness; or when others guilty of wrongs are made our brothers and sisters with equal measures of God's generosity.

I am not proposing today that we embrace a communist economy, though you can see how the earliest Christian communities did indeed form themselves as pure communes where all resources were shared as any had need – regardless of merit.

What I do find compelling is what this parable says to affluent, privileged mainline Christians and their churches.

It's no surprise that many in Mexico believed that the world was going to end yesterday – that after hurricanes, floods and earthquakes the world had entered what the Bible calls the 'end times.' Indeed, with so much devastation from Houston to Miami to Mexico, to the Caribbean, and Puerto Rico one wonders what a social order based on the merit system will make of the aftermath when real climate change invokes its wrath. Pundits claim there will be global chaos and war – which may, in fact, signal the real end times.

But we don't even need to imagine disparity on a global level to contemplate how unsentimental grace, real grace might function in a city like Buffalo – segregated and poor, we know, from annual statistical reports – yet, a city, now enjoying a resurgence that benefits some of the population.

If race is a “subtractor” when it comes to economic opportunity, education and social stability then what does a story like today's parable suggest is a meaningful and appropriate response for a congregation like ours?

The first thing that comes to mind is that grace would have us do – and by the way, the Community Foundation and its Racial Equity Roundtable has invited us to participate – the first thing that needs to happen is the work of dismantling age-old racial stereotypes – but we can add also class, gender, age and sexual orientation stereotypes that allow us to 'justify' a merit system that denies grace to some. Given the nationalist and supremacist movements that have reared their ugly heads this work can't come too soon.

With the old infrastructure of bias and bigotry dismantled then businesses, social clubs and organizations, religious communities and neighbors can begin the work of building a new infrastructure of relationships that bridge race, age, sexual orientation and other gaps in our social landscape.

This is work that is bigger than any one organization, foundation, employer or church – but work worthy and life-giving to any group that undertakes it.

Ultimately, it comes down to a question of gaining our souls. The parable that immediately precedes the laborers in the vineyard and the first time the phrase 'the first shall be last and the last shall be first' is used in Matthew is the parable of the rich young man. Here is someone who has benefitted handsomely from the economic and religious merit systems – now he asks Jesus for that one last thing he can do to achieve, to merit, eternal life. When Jesus tells him to sell everything and give it to the poor the man goes sadly away for he had many possessions. The man has lost his soul in and to the merit system. Grace frees us from the soul-destroying belief that God's love requires merit.

You gotta love a God like this vineyard owner who goes out again and again to find workers to be recipients of his generosity. Jesus tells the story to remind his followers of what their mission was as they prepared to enter Jerusalem and face a hurricane of resistance. I suspect he wanted to remove any notion on their part that their sticking by him would relieve them of the dangerous work of challenging a world that lives and dies on the old merit system. He was about to upset the whole teetering enterprise by demonstrating that God's grace was available even to those who had him in their sights and were bent on removing him as a threat to his power.

What the parables prompts is a shift of focus from me and my merit to God's unsentimental grace and those who haven't yet found it. It amounts to a reordering of our spiritual universe – much like Copernicus' discovery that the earth revolved around the sun – reordered the astronomy, cosmology, theology, and self-understanding of the Renaissance church.

For people and congregations who start to see things from God's perspective – that much of the world has not yet heard the good news that divine love and acceptance awaits them whenever they their hearts to the Holy One of Israel, change is imminent. No longer is our little world of merit and reward at the center of our fashionably understated, fiscally responsible and penurious Presbyterian solar system but a God whose sunshine and abundance falls equally on all of his children – rich and poor, old and young, gay and straight. black and white.

A church that loses sight of that perspective and recedes into spread sheets that forecast only sustainability and not generosity has its days numbered;

but a church that extends itself and seeks to befriend and encompass the needs of its neighbors regardless of their merit or social acceptability, that church and its mission will grow and thrive.

Going against the grain of the merit system starts by welcoming anyone who is willing, outside the walls of this church, to join us in the vineyard of social justice and spiritual renewal. It means we are no longer first in line even if our family has worshipped here for several generations, even with our lofty professional titles and privileges.

These are ominous times to be baptizing children; what will their future look like in a world where the stakes for those who have an inside advantage in the merit system grow higher while the increasing numbers of those with no social, economic or educational advantage promises to deliver only hardship?

No one has a crystal ball to predict the future, but we can be assured that if the children of this church experience God's grace and learn to share it with their neighbors who are disadvantaged or appear to be outside the system that has rewarded them, then the world might still have a chance.

Society will always need good citizens, but it's good Christians who have the potential to create real human community and not just clubs of like-minded, like-privileged people. Amen.