

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Exodus 16: 2 – 15  
Philippians 1: 21 – 30Psalm 105: 1 – 6, 37 – 45  
Matthew 20: 1 – 16

-----

“I believe that grace is love where love does not have to be, where there is no reason for love.” So wrote Sophronia Scott, this month’s author in *Forward Day by Day*. Grace is love where love does not have to be, where there is no reason for love. Today, our Scripture readings are filled with stories of grace: God’s grace, God’s love where God has no reason to love. God’s love where God’s love does not have to be. Which, if you think about it, is really the story of the whole Bible. God’s love where God’s love does not have to be. If nothing else, Scripture lets us know that it is God’s very nature to love.

Two of today’s lessons, from Exodus and Matthew, are stories of people whining and complaining. Stories of ingratitude. Stories where there wouldn’t really be much of any reason to love. In Exodus, the Israelites, somewhere in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, are upset with Moses and Aaron for bringing them into this desert where food is scarce. Apparently, even the hardships of slavery under Pharaoh look good by comparison. It is the first of many times that these people will grumble and protest about their journey.

Moses takes the issue up with Yahweh, God. Yahweh has already heard the complaints and Yahweh has a plan. Yahweh will provide quail for meat in the evening and the little flakes of manna for bread each morning. God provides for, cares for, loves the Israelites even when they are pretty unlovable. But there’s one caveat. They are not to take more than they need for a day. Why? Because they can’t store up God’s generosity, God’s grace.

In Matthew, we have the story of the vineyard owner who keeps going out every few hours to hire more and more laborers for his vineyard. With the first set, the ones he hires first thing in the morning around 6 am, he promises to pay them the usual daily wage, which would be a denarius. It’s helpful to know that a denarius is a subsistence living at best. It’s rather like our minimum wage. It may be enough to put bread on the table, but nothing more. However, that’s the usual wage for working a twelve-hour shift from sunrise to sunset. So, of course, the first set of laborers agree to that.

For whatever reason – perhaps because there is too much to harvest and it must be done quickly, perhaps simply because he wants to put more people to work – the vineyard owner goes out again at 9 am, noon, and 3 pm, each time hiring more laborers. Then finally, with only an hour left, the owner goes out one more time. There are still some folks standing around. And the vineyard owner, who has gone out expecting to find folks who need work, seems a little surprised to find them. ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ he asks them, even though he is apparently counting on, or at least hoping to, find them. ‘Because no one hired us,’ they respond. ‘Well come on then,’ the owner says, ‘I’ve got work for you.’ So they come and work that last hour.’

Now Jesus is telling this parable to his own disciples, those closest to him. And up to this point, the story sounds very normal to them. But then comes the turn of the parabolic screw, when Jesus’ punchline turns expectations upside down.

The landowner tells his manager to start paying the Johnny-come-latelies first, and then work back towards those first hired. Those who have toiled for so much longer and through the heat of the day. The manager hands each of the one-hour people a denarius, which must make each of them

delighted. They will have enough to feed their families. The twelve-hour folks, as well as the rest of the laborers hired throughout the day are looking on, and are probably wide-eyed and hopeful. What are they going to receive if the vineyard owner is that generous with the last-hired?? But the manager continues to hand out a denarius to each worker, no matter how long they've been there, finally finishing with those who have been there all day. And those all-day folks are miffed.

'That's not fair!' they call out to the owner, grumbling and rumbling, just like the people in the desert. 'What's not fair?' the owner responds. 'I'm living into the bargain that I made with each of you. Don't complain. If I choose to be generous to some, that's my business. I have treated you fairly.'

Remember, Jesus is telling this parable to his closest followers. And it's important to look at the context in which Matthew records this. Jesus is on the other side of the Jordan, in the midst of crowds, healing folks, responding to challenges by the Pharisees and welcoming the little children. Someone comes up to Jesus and asks him what 'one good deed' does it take to inherit eternal life? We know this story. The man is trying to nail this eternal life thing down, trying to hedge his bets. He ends up walking away because Jesus tells him to give away his many possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Ouch. That would make *him* poor. Well, poor in stuff, anyway. The man walks away sadly because he doesn't want to do this.

As the man walks away, Jesus turns to his disciples. 'He's going to have a heck of a time getting into the Kingdom of God!' Jesus says, to which the disciples are flabbergasted. The presumption is that the rich must be God's favorites precisely because they've been blessed with lots of money and stuff. Eternal life, the Kingdom of God, is apparently not about wealth or stuff. Nor is life here, Jesus is saying.

Once again, Peter speaks up for everyone. 'We've given up everything!' Peter says, trying to assure himself perhaps that they've done the right thing. 'Yes, and you will receive it all a hundred times over,' Jesus says, affirming Peter. Then Jesus tells this parable of the vineyard owner. Which turns out to be about eternal life, and not labor-management relations or economics as we know them.

Apparently, there is such a thing as a twelfth of a denarius (it's called a *pondion*), so presumably the landowner could give a *pondion* to those who have worked only one hour, and so forth. But it turns out that the currency of the vineyard is eternal life and not some coinage, and there is no division of eternal life. You or I can't receive 1/12<sup>th</sup> of eternal life. There is no such thing as a twelfth part of God's love. We all get the whole shebang whether we accept early on or much later. There are no consolation prizes, no silver or bronze runners-up. In the Kingdom of God, there is only one "wage": the gift of God's self. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways," says the Lord, "for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Most of us, I dare say, tend to associate ourselves with the all-day people. It's our gut reaction. It doesn't seem fair. We are uncomfortable with the message of this parable. It's the prodigal son story all over again and we so easily take the part of the older brother. But like the older brother, what we fail to recognize is just how much we have already received of God's grace, God's love when God didn't need to love us.

But what if we were the Johnny-(or Janie)-come-latelies to the vineyard? Or what if we were at least concerned about them enough to want them to be able to go home and put food on the table for

their families? Then this parable would be amazing. Yes, that's right, we'd say. Everybody deserves to eat.

All too often, we approach life as if it were a zero-sum game, where there seems to be a finite amount, so that if you get some, then I get less. What if we didn't approach life that way? What if we realized – and lived – as if we are all in this together? For us to look at life this way would mean that we are seeing things through the eyes of God. That we are understanding with the heart and mind of Christ. That we trust in the grace of God.

So, what might this parable have to say to us in light of so many of our national conversations: health care, ensuring a livable minimum wage, providing educational opportunities, etc.? What if, instead of undervaluing relationships and overvaluing wealth and stuff, we started measuring our well-being by how the least of these, 'those last hired,' are doing? In the words of one writer, if this parable 'breaks the shell of habit, disturbs our comfortable routines and redirects our way of thinking, then it has done its job...' [Living the Good News, Sep. 19, 1999]

"I believe that grace is love where love does not have to be, where there is no reason for love." What if we were to realize – really realize! – that the wonder of God's grace is that "deserving" has nothing to do with it? What would happen if, like the vineyard owner, we were to be purveyors of abundant, random grace – throwing caution to the wind and extending love where love does not have to be, where there is no apparent reason for love? What would our relationships be like? What would our world be like? What if, instead of being concerned with fair or unfair, we attempted to give the world a glimpse of God's utterly limitless grace? Our lives, and the world just might be a little more like the Kingdom of God.

+