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FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST September 21, 2014

“Too Much Grace?”

(Matthew 20:15)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (Mt. 20:15)

Collect of the Day

Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

Envy is the most joyless of the transgressions. There's no pleasure in envy, not like there is, at least on the surface, with other transgressions. Envy promises only pain. Proverbs 14 says "Envy makes the bones rot" (v. 30). That is, envy destroys from the inside.

Envy is pain at the good fortune of others. That is, we are so fallen that often, we cannot even celebrate the good fortune of others. We are able to celebrate the ruin of others, which is called Schadenfreude, but are not always able to celebrate the success and blessings of others. Instead, we feel envious.

Envy is there right from the beginning. Could it be the devil led Adam and Eve into sin because he was envious of their blessed and happy state? Cain was envious of Abel. Joseph's brothers were envious of Joseph. Saul was envious of David. Mark chapter 15 says Pontius Pilate knew that it was out of envy that the Chief Priests handed Jesus over to him (v. 10).

Each of us knows what envy feels like. I remember right out the seminary one of my classmates, a friend, received a rather cushy call to serve a small, affluent parish in southern California. With the help of his parents he and his wife were able to invest in a home, and what an investment it was. It more than doubled in value. Meanwhile, the value of our own home in St. Louis was stagnant, flat lining. He could have sold his one home and bought half our neighborhood. I should have been happy for him, and at times I was, a little. But at other times, the bones were rotting. What curious sinners we are! We think we know what fairness means, but within our definition of fairness, there's little room for grace.

It must have been late in their life together, near the end in fact, when one of the disciples finally asks what they were all

thinking. The twelve had followed him up and down Galilee for three years. They had walked away from their families and jobs, away from the comfort of home and routine. They had gone hungry, slept on the ground, been cold and tired. And now he's decided to go to Jerusalem, and they're not sure they're going to make it out alive. The twelve have given up quite a bit, actually, sacrificing everything for him. And they're wondering how their sacrifices might be rewarded. In the verses just before our text, he's talking about heaven (who gets in, who doesn't), and so the disciples are wondering what their reward will be, given their long service. Surely there's a little more in store for them than there is for the "Johnny Come Latelys." Jesus answers their concern with a parable.

The owner of a vineyard goes to the town square where laborers gather everyday looking for work. This landowner has a harvest of grapes that are ready. With grapes, timing is everything. He needs workers today, not the day after tomorrow. And he needs a lot of them. So at sunrise, 6:00 a.m. he is already in town hiring everyone in sight. But the harvest is large; the work is slow, so he returns to the labor market at 9:00 a.m. and hires another group of workers. At noon and 3:00 he's back again, hiring a third and fourth group. And at 5:00 (just an hour before quitting time), he hires yet a fifth group.

At quitting time the workers line up to be paid. The owner begins with the last group hired. Surprisingly, they receive a full day's pay, even though they were in the vineyard just an hour. He pays them in full view of everyone else. They, of course, are delighted, and grateful.

I know who else is delighted: all the other laborers. They're thinking if these people who worked just an hour received a full day's wages, then they, who worked all day, from dawn, through the blazing heat of midday . . . they who did most of the work, surely they're going to receive a big, fat bonus. And so when their turn comes to be paid, they can hardly believe their eyes. They receive the same amount as those who worked just an hour. They receive a full day's pay, but not a penny more, and they're not happy about it,

not at all. “It’s not fair” they say. “You’ve made them equal to us. We worked all day under the sun. They worked an hour” to which the owner responds, “Take what you have and go. It’s my money. I can do with it as I please.”

We can sympathize with those all-day workers can’t we? Maybe we’ve even experienced a bit of their grievance. In summers during college, I worked for the Delavan School District. We painted classrooms and bathrooms and did roof work and the like. It quickly became apparent the college boys did the bulk of the work, while the grizzled veterans, Butch and Benny, slept in the truck . . . or went on a frivolous errand and spent a good long time chewing the fat with Ted and the boys down at Barker lumber. We understood the bitterness of the all day laborers in the parable. Those laggards who barely broke a sweat are paid far more than those with broken blisters on their hands.

By the way, anyone who tries to use this parable as a business model will soon be having a going out of business sale. But this isn’t about running a business. It’s about grace. That’s what the all day laborers are grumbling about, isn’t it? They’re grumbling about grace . . . about someone receiving what he did not earn. The full day workers got what they were promised. Their discontent arose from the scandalous mathematics of grace.

Most of us grew up with the idea lurking somewhere that God is a bean counter. We have an image of a mathematical God who weighs our good deeds against the bad on a scale and then gives us what we have coming. But in this strange story, God is not a mathematician. God is not keeping score. This owner doesn’t settle accounts on the basis of what the workers did. He settles them on the basis of his generosity, his grace. The rewards of God are not proportionate to human effort. The God who lavishly clothes the flowers and feeds the birds delights also in giving people far more than they could ever earn.

By the way, there’s a similar parable in rabbinic tradition, (tradition of the Jewish rabbis) where God will give Israel a large reward for their long service to him, but

the Gentiles a small reward, because they've only worked a little. That makes more sense to us but it's not grace.

There's also an early fourth century rabbinic parable in which one man who worked only two hours is given the same pay as those who worked all day. But at the end of the parable we learn it's because he accomplished more in two hours than the others did in a whole day! Again, *that* makes sense to us, but it is not grace. We are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains with us, but we don't know how to handle a God who is generous to those who haven't earned it. We don't know how to handle a God who, as Jesus said, "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt. 5:45).

Do you remember the prophet Hosea in the Old Testament? God asked him to marry a woman named Gomer in order to illustrate his love for Israel. Gomer bears three children for Hosea, but then she abandons the family to live with another man. Later, she works as a prostitute. Hosea is heartbroken, absolutely devastated. But then God gives Hosea a most unusual mission: "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her, Hosea, as the Yahweh loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods."

Gomer did not get fairness, or justice. She got grace. "How can I give you up, Ephraim?" God asks. "How can I hand you over, Israel?" Substitute your own name for Ephraim or Israel. Such is his love for you.

But it begs the question: Does this whole idea of grace mean that we don't even have to try? Does it mean we don't have to bother with painful sacrifice, with lowly service, with messy evangelism, with annoying obedience? If we all get equal pay, why not just eat, drink and make merry?

First this: What you do or fail to do *does* matter to God. Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery, but he also said, "Go and sin no more." The day after the Prodigal Son came home, the day after that big party celebrating his return, I think it was understood he would be out in the field

with his older brother hard at work. Paul writes in the Epistle, “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27). That is, grace is costly. It cost Jesus the anguish of the cross, the abandonment, the curse of God. There’s nothing cheap or easy about grace, even for God’s Son. Therefore, our response to this grace should not be cheap or easy. We cheapen his grace when we decide it doesn’t matter then how we live. We cheapen his grace, when we receive it, but then coast, with little regard for his commandments, and a laizze faire, take it or leave it attitude toward worship and service in his kingdom. We can cheapen his grace with our money, with the assumption we can make him love us more by giving more.

And this is important: *We cheapen his grace when we think it’s mostly about inclusiveness and acceptance*, which is the pervasive theme of so much of American theology today. When it’s all about inclusiveness and acceptance, you begin to get the impression that God must not care one little bit about what happens anywhere in the cosmos because he’s so tolerant and inclusive. But there’s a difference between God tolerating us and God loving us. In the first, he looks the other way and we’re still dead in our transgressions and sin, still foul and filthy with sin. In the second, out of love, he goes to the cross to redeem and cleanse us of our sin.

With this in mind, who wants to be accepted by God? I certainly don’t. But I do want to be loved by a God who forgives and cleanses me. To tell us that God accepts us is hardly Good News. But a God who loves and forgives us, that gives meaning to our lives. So, be of good cheer. God does not accept you. But he does love you.

Finally, this parable was not the answer Peter and the others were looking for. They were hoping for a big-time bonus in heaven for all their hard work on earth. So if you think yourself like the all day worker, this is not a good news parable. But if you know you’re one of those one hour workers, and the owner has just blessed you with way more than you earned, then this parable is great news.

And the great truth of this parable is that we are all one hour workers. God has given and will give us in heaven far more than we could have ever earned. On earth, we have but a short life span. Heaven is an eternal paradise. Do you think there's anything you can do within this [life span], to earn all of that?

To some in this life the Lord gives less. To some in this life he gives more, and also expects more. To all who believe in his name he gives eternal life. So life is short! Don't let your bones rot with envy. Instead, be glad and grateful for God's grace wherever you see it. Amen.

