

"Privilege"
Matthew 20:1-16
September 20, 2020
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

My favorite children's story of all time was based on this text. Many years ago, when we worshiped in the sanctuary, I told the older kids that if they would carry a stack of hymnals from one side of the chancel to the other, I would give them each two pretzel fish- and I held up the bag. They were all smiles- happy to get a snack in church! So they each picked a stack of hymnals and carried them from the wall by the organ to the wall behind the piano. They put them down and I gave them each two pretzels. They were quite happy.

Then I told the little kids that if they would pick up a hymnal and put it down right where they were I would give them each five skittles- and I pulled out a glass bowl filled to the brim with bright, colorful skittles. The little kids were very excited! And as if on cue, the older kids said, "That's not fair!"

The little kids picked up a hymnal and put it down and I gave them each five skittles (yay for sugar in church!).

As the older kids complained, I asked them: "Did I lie to you?" They grudgingly said, "No." I asked, "Did you get less than I promised you?" They said, "No."

Then Renee Neher, who was maybe 10, said, "I know what you're doing!" And I asked her what I was doing. And she said, "You're trying to teach us something about sharing or something like that."

I said, "Yes, something like that. The older kids were happy with what they had until they saw the little kids get something more, something they thought was better. They weren't happy with my generosity. But since the snacks were mine, I could do with them what I wanted."

I said, "I think sometimes we don't want God to be as generous with other people as we want God to be with us."

And then I gave the older kids five skittles each and the little kids two fish and everybody was happy.

I remember that children's story because I knew it would not take long for the older kids to cry, "That's not fair! Without knowing it, they played their part perfectly!

I think most of us, upon hearing this parable from Matthew's Gospel will cry out, "That's not fair!" And I think we do that because when we put ourselves into this parable- we think we are the first workers who worked hard all day.

Before we dive into this particular parable, let's look at what the parable is. Richard Lischer says *"Parables merely invite the unsuspecting listener into a harmless little story in which something odd and possibly disorienting will occur."* (1)

Parables are designed to delight, confuse, and offend, maybe all at the same time. Jesus told these tricky little stories against a backdrop of real life, in a time of economic and political oppression. They were originally intended to speak to and against those unjust systems.

In the Gospel of Matthew parables make up 43% of everything said by Jesus. That percentage alone tells us how important they were for the people in Jesus' time and for us in this time. Jesus had about forty stories in his repertoire. All are built around exceedingly simple and vivid images. They are usually stories about everyday moments with no mention of God. But they insist that we will meet God in the daily minutiae of life.

Parables may be brief, but they are not sound bites and they are not told just for entertainment. *Parables offer verbal evidence of Jesus' identity, message, and saving purpose in the world.* (2)

Richard Lischer writes, *"Jesus offers parables as a lens through which to glimpse the actual presence of the Divine in the ordinary situations he depicts. His parables do not enshrine a body of truths but suggest a method for approaching and experiencing the truth. If one cannot meet the reign of God amid the pots and pans of daily life, of what earthly use is the reign of God?"* (3)

Parables offer vivid images that are easily remembered- a woman mixing yeast with flour to make bread, a runaway stuck feeding the pigs, a farmer planting seeds, a woman looking under the sofa for a misplaced coin, a desperate shepherd searching in the wilderness for a lost lamb. The people who first heard these parables could easily picture themselves doing these things.

Parables are designed to invite us in and to provoke a response and that response will say a great deal about our understanding of God.

At the end of Matthew, chapter 19, the disciples started asking Jesus what their reward would be for leaving everything behind to follow him. He knew they were really asking if

they would get the best seats in the house in heaven. He told them " *Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*"

Then Jesus told them a parable. "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner..." and he was off and running with the disciples just trying to keep up. He told them a story about a landowner who hired a bunch of guys early in the morning with a promise of a certain amount of money at the end of the day- let's say \$50- enough to support their families for that day. Throughout the day the landowner kept showing up with more people who needed work.

At the end of the day the landowner sent his manager to pay everyone starting with the last to arrive. These guys had worked about an hour and when the manager handed them each fifty bucks the first workers started thinking, "Alright! If they get \$50 for one hour of work imagine how much more we are going to get for working all day!"

But when the manager got to them and handed them the agreed upon \$50 they were outraged! "*That's not fair! We were here first! We worked harder than anybody else! We should get more.*"

The landowner asked, "*Did I lie to you? Did I not give you what I promised you? Didn't you agree to work for the day for that amount? So, what's the problem? Are you angry because I choose to be generous and treat everyone the same?*"

Nothing was taken away from the early workers, They lost nothing in the bargain but they thought they did.

In his commentary on Matthew, Tom Long writes, "*The purpose of this parable was not to provide a practical guide for the management of a vineyard, or a factory, or a classroom. Indeed, the aim of this parable is to be monumentally impractical, to fracture so thoroughly our expectations, our customary patterns of practicality, that we are forced to think new thoughts- new thoughts about ourselves, about other people, and about God. (4)*

Everyone in this story receives grace, they all received a day's wage- they all received what they needed to survive. No one is cheated. No one is lied to. And yet some still cry out, "That's not fair! I deserve more!"

Tom Long writes, "*Suddenly we see plainly the true poverty of the first hour workers. Everybody in the parable is tendered with the wealth of the kingdom; the deep river of providence flows through everybody's life. God gives everyone a daily wage so extravagant that no one could ever spend it all. A deluge of grace descends on all; torrents of joy and blessing fall everywhere. And there the first-hour workers stand, drenched in God's*

mercy, an ocean of peace running down their faces, clutching their little contracts and whining that they deserve more rain." (5)

Jesus ends this story with his trademark zinger. *"So the last will be first and the first will be last."*

That isn't socialism folks. That's the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In God's realm, in God's economy everything is turned sideways and upside down. God as the landowner uses divine freedom and resources to be outrageously, surprisingly generous.

Jesus shows us over and over again in the Gospels that God is generous to the first and to the last, to the leper and to the lame, to the Gentile and to the Jew- and to us. Tom Long claims that this parable gives us the most challenging and offensive word of all: *God is generous.*

Why that offends us I do not know. But it surely does. I think many of us probably see ourselves as the first -hour workers- the ones who arrived early and put in a long, hard days work. We did what was expected. We worked for our money. We followed the rules. Those other people? The ones who came late? They didn't deserve what they got and we did.

The landowner asked, *"Are you envious because I am generous."* And the answer is, "Yes! Yes we are. You may be generous with us but not with those other guys. They aren't with us. They aren't like us. They don't deserve your generosity as much as we do."

This parable asks the question- what kind of God does this? And the answer is: a just God. A loving God. A merciful God. God's generosity often violates our own sense of right and wrong and it certainly violates the values of the world in which we live. That, my friends, is grace. Grace is the mercy God demonstrates in countless ways to undeserving people, like us. Fortunately for us, God is a lousy bookkeeper.

It is important to remember that this parable wasn't told to the crowds or to the religious leaders. It was told to Jesus' inner circle, to the disciples, to those who walked the dirt roads with him every single day. It was told to those who had experienced first-hand the amazing grace of God. And I would guess they were just as offended by it as we are.

What is it about the audacious grace of God that reveals our own selfishness? In a letter, Flannery O'Connor wrote, *" All human nature resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful."*

Frederick Buechner writes this about grace. *"Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about. A crucial*

*eccentricity of the 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 have never 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. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too." (6)

Writer Kathleen Norris suggests that maybe the reason we worship is to respond to grace. She writes, "*We praise God not to celebrate our own faith but to give thanks for the faith God has in us. To let ourselves look at God, and let God look back at us. And to laugh, and to sing, and be delighted because God has called us God's own.*" (7)

In God's economy pretzel fish are grace. In God's economy skittles re grace.

Our God is a lavish, extravagant, audaciously generous God of grace.

May we be God's lavish, extravagant, audaciously generous, gracious people.

Amen.

End Notes:

- INTERPRETATION SERIES: READING THE PARABLES, Richard Lischer, Westminster John Knox Press. 2014. P. 19.
- Lischer, p. 5.
- Lischer, p. 11.
- MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. P. 224.
- Long, p. 226.
- LISTENING TO YOUR LIFE: DAILY MEDITATIONS, Frederick Buechner, Harper San Francisco. 1992. Pp. 288-289.

AMAZING GRACE: A VOCABULARY OF FAITH, Kathleen Norris, Riverhead Books. 199