

Message
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*Adapted from a Bible Meditation given by Donne Hayden
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How Grace Works

By Donne Hayden

On Thursday afternoon in the Pre-Yearly Meeting Retreat, we discussed in small groups three passages of scripture, among them Matthew 20:1-16, Jesus' parable about the vineyard owner and his workers. Like most of you, I've read the parable quite a few times. The first few times through, I gave up in frustration, uncertain what exactly Jesus could have had in mind in telling the disciples such a story. In case you don't remember the details, the parable goes like this. First, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who goes out early in the morning—maybe around 7:00 or so—and hires workers for his vineyard that day. Around 9:00 in the morning, he goes out to the marketplace where he sees some fellows standing around, so he tells them to go on over to his vineyard—he'll hire them and pay them "whatever is right." Around noon, he goes out, sees more people, and hires them; he does this again about 3:00 in the afternoon and again at 5:00. At quitting time, he tells his manager to call the workers together and give them their pay, starting with those who were hired last. Each one who worked receives a full day's wage. When the manager comes to those hired first, early in the morning, they expect to receive more than those hired later. But each of them also receives a full day's wage, but no more. As most of us would, they complain to the owner, saying that he is treating them no better than those who worked only an hour or so. The

landowner points out that each one got what he agreed to when he hired on; he tells them to take what belongs to them and clear out. He asks, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” And Jesus ends the parable with the comment, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matthew 20:1-16 NRSV)

This is another parable in which Jesus is trying to teach the disciples (and us) about the kingdom of heaven also known as the kingdom of God. In my understanding, the kingdom of God is—as Jesus says so often—“among us.” It is not up in the sky or somewhere in the future, but here, now, on earth, in any situation where people practice loving compassion. In the parable of the vineyard workers, Jesus once again tries to help us understand the nature of this divine territory, apparently difficult for us because its ways are alien to the way things are done in the earthly realm.

I find it interesting that Jesus never describes the Kingdom of God or Heaven as a *place*. He doesn’t tell us about angels on clouds playing harps—that’s someone else’s imagination. No, Jesus always gives us *an action*. It’s like a woman *putting yeast in bread*; it’s like *finding treasure*; it’s like a small seed *growing to be a huge tree*. In the case of Matthew 20, it’s like a vineyard owner doing certain things.

Let’s consider this story a few lines at a time:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner”

What are the qualities of a landowner? S/he is responsible for care of the vineyard and, being the *owner*, is concerned that it will thrive. We are to hear “landowner,” I believe, as an analogy for God, who “owns” all creation and organizes things for its good care, so that all creation may thrive. The vineyard represents earth, I think, one part of creation.

The next couple of lines tell us the landowner *“went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.”*

God seeks us to do his work on earth, in his vineyard, and when we “hire on,” we agree to “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8). Traditionally, people have believed they will receive certain rewards for doing this. Some of us believe that by doing God’s work, we will avoid hell and go to heaven after we die. But if we consider the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven is here, now, among us, perhaps we should reconsider what sort of reward we may expect by working in the vineyard

In the next section of the parable, the landowner continues to hire workers throughout the day—he hires everyone available and agreeable. *When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.”* I

We can think about these workers as representing different truths about individual lives. For instance, some of us live a long time; some of us live only a short while; some have difficult lives filled with hard work; others have easy lives with little struggle.

The parable becomes interesting and somewhat frustrating when it comes time for the workers to receive their wages. *“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his*

manager, *'Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'*" Wait a minute. Those last hired get paid first? Not fair, we say.

Not only do they get paid first, but *"When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage."* They only worked one hour before quitting time but they received the usual wage for a whole day's work! Generous, we say, but not really fair. Even worse—when the first workers (who began before 9:00 a.m. and worked all day until quitting time), when these came forward to receive their wages, *"they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage."* Not fair! We can all feel it. Surely for working hard all day, these workers should receive more than the others. Their sense of being treated unfairly leads them to *"grumble against the landowner,"* as many of us would be inclined to do. They point out the unfairness here: *"These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."* We worked all day in the hot sun while they just worked an hour late in the day, but you are treating us all the same! We started in the morning and worked all day; we *did it right*, but they barely worked at all. How is that fair?

The landowner replies: *"Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go."* I am not treating you unfairly—you agreed to do my work for a certain reward that you knew about when you started. Notice that nowhere does it say the landowner paid the workers *according to the quality or quantity of their work, on how much they produced*. Finally the landowner says the most outrageous thing imaginable: *"I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. (Not fair!) Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"*

And Jesus adds at the end of the parable: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

In our discussion on Thursday, I had a sudden insight, triggered no doubt by the discussion and by things other people said. (As a side note, one remarkable thing about reading the scriptures is that we can mine them again and again for wisdom and still find new understandings. A second remarkable thing is that reading them with others multiplies the possibilities that we will discover something we’d never thought of before.)

Here is how I understand this parable now. It’s about grace. Specifically, it’s about how God’s grace works.

If we think about this parable in terms of the *material* world, it doesn’t make sense. It is counter to all our experience of what’s right and fair. In the kingdom of God, however, *love* is the coin of the realm, the preferred currency. Now think about it—love, unlike money, is not quantifiable—at least God’s love is not. So each worker in God’s vineyard receives a wage of love—complete and unconditional love—all of it possible. I once had a professor who, when students complained they hadn’t had enough time to complete an assigned, responded, “You had all the time there is.” Likewise, we each have all God’s love there is—God does not divvy up love according to how long we have done justice, loved kindness, walked humbly with Him, nor according to which denomination or even which religion we are part of. God loves us all, *whether we deserve it or not*. In fact, deserving has nothing whatsoever to do with it. God’s grace is that “the first will be last and the last will be first” because they are *the same* to God. We are *all* beloved. Here is the most difficult part for most of us: Can I accept that God loves my enemy as much as God loves me? Can I understand that God wants me to love my enemies

because God loves them? This is difficult for us. We ARE envious of God's love—we don't want God to love those we dislike or disapprove of—we want God to love what we love. But it doesn't work like that. In *sharing* abundant love *equally* among all in the vineyard, God generates more of this remarkable currency, encouraging us to understand this dynamic and do the same thing. God loves all of us, *whether we deserve it or not*. And that is how Grace works.

May we be aware of God's grace all around us and may we be gracious to each other, whether we deserve it or not.