*JUST GRACE*

Isaiah 61:10-11

Matthew 20:1-16

November 18, 2018

“Be thankful? Thankful for what?” These were probably the questions of the man who was hired first, who worked the whole day and got no more than the one who only worked one hour. And his question might well be ours, you and I who sit here in these pews and wonder for what to give thanks. The story in the Gospel lesson is a parable which asks us to identify with a real-life, day to day situation.

Real-life, but an outrage! The man who was hired first and worked all day *definitely* felt it, and you and I can feel it, too. An outrage!

Let’s put ourselves inside his shoes for a bit. He’s industrious, well-groomed, dressed clean, and early for work. He’s the model worker: cheerful and hard-working, and one who takes pride in his work. This is the guy most of us would like to be.

He’s worked every day as a day laborer for no one knows how long. He gets down to the placement line at 4:30 in the morning to be first in line and be sure that he is not overlooked as the landowners come in to the town square to select their field hands. He’s glad to work for this particular farmer. He’s worked for his before, and he knows this man is fair. There’s lots to do, and he’s anxious to get on with it.

We can hear him say, “Ninety dollars for the day? Sure; no problem. That’s the going wage. Thank you, sir.”

About noon, he’s glad to have some more help. “Plenty of work for everyone. Maybe we can get this whole field done in one day.” At three, again he’s glad to have some more help. Then at five, with one hour of work left, when more men come on, again he is pleased. “It’s good for these men to be working, finally. With them, we’ve got a good shot at getting ‘er done. Glad they’re here.”

And then we can see it: “Six o’clock. Guys, we got it done . . . Well, looky there. Those one hour guys got $90. Good for them; they can sure use it. I knew this landowner was special when I saw him this morning. Bet we’re going to get proportionately more. Let’s see, what’s that going to make my share . . .?

What’s this? Just $90? There’s gotta be some mistake. Check it again. I punched in at 6:00 am this morning. Now, don’t get me wrong. Those other guys probably deserve their $90, but fair’s fair. I worked the whole day. Shouldn’t my share be larger than theirs accordingly?

“Yeah, I remember. We said ninety. No, I guess I’m not being cheated. Yeah, that’s the going rate, and I’m glad to do the work. It’s just that I was led to expect . . . Jealous because you’re kind? Well, uh . . . (and then he walks away) Who’s he being kind to, anyway?”

And part of us agrees with him. We feel he WAS cheated. Somehow, it IS outrageous that the landowner didn’t give this man more than he promised him. It offends our sense of fair play and of God’s justice that one person was given a great gift, and the other was not.

When he asks, “Who’s he being kind to, anyway,” we think with part of our minds, that the owner DID pay him justly; he didn’t have to hire him at all, and the worker did agree to that wage. But you and I don’t *really* think the landowner was kind . . . merely JUST. And that’s at *best*! Deep down, we think the worker was cheated.

This all-day worker is easier to identify with than we might think. He . . . or she . . . occurs *frequently* in our churches. Take Ann. She was brought to Sunday school by her parents since she was very small. It became part of who she was . . .

of who her family was. She’d go to Sunday school the first hour and then to worship with her parents. And whenever they went to her grandparents, for Sunday dinner, it would all be recalled and strengthened.

Ann’s Grandma and her parents, by their faithfulness and interest, and their obvious commitment to Jesus, truly brought her into the church. She came to know church as a deeply satisfying place—a place she looked forward to, and actually enjoyed. As she grew older, she came to realize that Jesus Christ really was her savior. She didn’t know what happened or how, but that didn’t matter. He was clearly at the center of who she was, so she decided to live so that Lordship showed.

Ann became active in the women’s association, and then several years ago, volunteered to teach Sunday school: 4th and 5th grades. Most everyone recognized Ann as one of the pillars of the church, so when the minister organized a select committee for evangelism and church vitality, she was included.

For 8 weeks that committee prayed, and planned, and taught, and developed leadership, and excited people in the church about the newness of life, and enthused them about being part of Christ’s Lordship. Then, at the end of their project, the pastor planned a Vitality Sunday, at which he would honor the people who must embodied the new-found identity in Christ.

The appointed Sunday came, and the people at the center of things thought surely that if he didn’t recognize Ann, the pastor was really missing something. Well, at the appointed time in the service, Rev. Maxwell called the congregation to recognize Joseph Bailey, Linda Gledhill, and last but certainly not least, Tom Underwood.

Tom Underwood? Besides last Sunday, he hadn’t come to church for ages, and everyone knew it. Joseph and Linda, they’re all right, people said to themselves, but Tom Underwood?

Ann herself was hurt. For her, this wasn’t just a thank-you for a job well-done; it was to be an honoring of a life well-lived. Didn’t activity and service and involvement in the church count for anything anymore? She didn’t *like* herself for it, and was ashamed of it, but there it was: the though “Tom Underwood? And not me??”

But Rev. Maxwell discerned her with these words: Tom most of all embodies our evangelism and vitality emphasis not for what he did, but for who he is. Tom, maybe most of all, is the child of our Father’s grace. For he was created new, his life newly reborn in Jesus Christ last week, just as we all prayed for.”

Neither activity nor weekly church attendance, nor pledging money really mean any more than mere *believing in Christ*, because nothing can add nor take away from Christ’s salvation which is our, regardless of what we have done.

Jesus turned the world upside down by telling a story about a landowner who paid a full day’s wage to a man who worked only one hour. Can you and I rejoice with that man . . . that man who may have tried SO HARD just to get a job, finally finding work at the last hour . . . and then was paid for a full day’s work? That man may have been able to finally feed his family again, beyond all expectation, after months of being out of work. Can we rejoice with him?

I suspect that many of us a really like Ann, if we would look at ourselves. We’ve committed ourselves to church, and it a time of recognition ever came, we’d like some. We naturally side with man who worked all day in the heat, for what turned out to be only an hour’s wage. The other guy always seems to win the applause.

Is God trust-worthy, or is he capricious, if he gives some people freely what others thought they had to earn? God doesn’t seem to give fairly sometimes.

But look again. What *is* he giving us? What are the workers, and thereby you and I, contracting for? A day’s wage? Some special recognition from the congregation? A little better deal in life?

I think not. The pay that God gives everybody equally, the pay that we contract for through our faith, is his SALVATION, God’s own, living presence, *forever.*

I’ve said the parable was striking first, because the full day worker doesn’t get any more than the one hour worker, but it REALLY turns the world upside down because the one hour worker got fantastically more than he expected to.

The full day worker, the Ann’s among us, get every bit we contracted for. We’re not cheated. It was what we were promised, what we hoped for from the beginning. That’s justice.

The one hour people, the ones who finally know Christ as a miracle in their lives . . . they feel they’ve received grace.

The Lord wants to give you and me the greatest gift of all time: his personal presence, the constancy of his love, an everlasting belongingness. It’s justice, really. He doesn’t promise Christians anything more than SALVATION. But what justice!!

You and I may sometimes feel we are in unfair positions, but the *justice* is, the *grace* is, that all we’ve contracted for . . . ALL (!) we’ve contracted for is the personal, living presence of God, forever.

Listen again to Isaiah as someone would who knows she is hired, and the wage is just grace:

I will rejoice heartily in the Lord,

in my God is the joy of my soul,

For he has clothed me with a robe of salvation

and wrapped me in a mantle of justice.

I hope that in this season, with Thanksgiving ahead of us this week, and our Lord’s birth on the horizon, that you and I can learn the lesson of the first

worker . . . and enjoy the exuberance of the last; I hope that awe can savor the joy of soul for as much of the day as we have been given, knowing that now, and forever, you and I wrapped in the robe of salvation.