

“The Laborers in the Vineyard”

Matthew 20: 1-16

Who do you relate to in this Scripture?” That question came up as I was preparing this sermon. “Who do you relate to in this Scripture?” The commentator continued this line of questioning by saying that who you relate to in this Scripture will determine how you receive the Good News that comes along with this story. This question started me to thinking of who I relate to in this story. On a good day, and most of the time, I like to say that I can relate to the landowner. After all, that is one of the reasons that I went into ministry, I like to help people. I like to make connections for people. I like sharing some good news every now and then. As I prepared this sermon, I would have said that I related to the landowner, that I could completely understand and appreciate the generosity of the landowner because after all that is the type of generosity and compassion that we are called to reflect as people of faith. But I have to admit that I had an experience this week that made rethink all my assumptions about myself and just who it is exactly that I relate to more in this Scripture.

It all started on Monday when I walked into the office and the phone was ringing. Joni let the person know that I had just walked in the door and passed the

phone call into my office. I answer the phone, “This is Heather” and waited for the person’s reply.

“I was referred to your church because I am looking for assistance. You see, my phone is about to be cut off and I really need my phone. You see, my husband has been diagnosed with cancer and I am unable to work right now because I have to take care of him. I’ve never done anything like this before, but can you help me?”

Immediately, my cynical side came out. I have heard this line before. So as the person continued to talk, I immediately began to think to myself...Sure, your husband has cancer. Sure, you can’t work. Sure, you need assistance. Inside my head, the grumbling started.

Even as I went through the motions, “Yes, we can help you. There is a \$150 limit that we can help you with so this will be the only time we can help you this year. Just give me your account number and I’ll call the phone company and let them know that we have pledged x amount”, I was grumbling and I was wondering why I should help this person out. I was wondering how many times did I have to hear this same old worn out story. I was wondering when were people going to quit taking advantage of the Midway Ministerial Association’s fund for assistance. People gave that money so that it would be used to really help people out, not be

used as a third source of income. As I sat there, listening to this person's plea for help, all I could do was grumble to myself, frustrated and aggravated.

I will admit that while I was talking with this person and getting her information, all I could imagine was that this person was sitting on her couch, watching some day time TV while I was out working hard for my paycheck. All I could imagine was that this person had their hand out because they were too lazy to work. All I could imagine was that this person had learned to work the system. All I could think about was that I have worked hard all day long in my vineyard and now here comes someone who has only worked one hour in the vineyard, and they expect to be rewarded, paid the same as me. They expected me to help them out. They expected me to show some compassion. They expected to get the same kind of treatment that I was getting. All I could think about was How unfair was that!

Reluctantly I went the motions once again. I called the phone company, and let them know what was going on with that certain account, all though while grumbling about the system, all the while grumbling about people who didn't want to work but expected others to take care of them, expected others to clean up their mess, expected others to bail them, all the while grumbling about how people take advantage of other people and their generosity.

And then a few days later, my grumbling about generosity stopped. I received a note, a thank you note. A note, thanking me for my kindness, thanking me for my willingness to help, thanking me for listening, thanking me for being a light during this dark time for this family, thanking me for showing God's grace and God's generosity in their time of need. And it was in that moment, I knew that I was not at all like the landowner in this Scripture. I was more like the workers who worked all day and expected more rewards than all the others. In just that moment, a little bit of grace was shown to me and make me rethink all my assumptions about those so called "other people" and their stories.

So who do I relate to in this Scripture? On a good day, I want to say the generous landowner but I have to admit that my experience this week showed me that probably most of the time, whether I want to admit it or not, I relate more to the workers who were paid last, who grumbled at the landowner's generosity, who questioned the landowner's motives, who grumbled because life is not fair.

And that is exactly the reaction that Matthew expected from us and his readers when he sat down to share this parable. When Matthew was writing this story, he knew that his readers, his community was struggling with the questions about the fairness of God's grace. They wanted to know how much of a reward would be waiting for them in heaven? They wanted to know Who was first and

most important in their community? They wanted to know Who would get a bigger portion of God's gifts among their community? They wanted to know how it was all going to be made right in the end. The funny thing about it is that Matthew would not be surprised that his readers would have related more to the workers who were paid last because like our society, they lived in a world that was based on hierarchy, that involved getting ahead by merit, and that involved being rewarded for your hard work.

The funny thing about it is that Matthew would not have been surprised that his readers would have related more to the workers who were paid last because they worked hard for what they had. And on top of all that, they saw people treating God's forgiveness as a get out of jail free card, and were not living a life according to God's word, only saying-It didn't matter because God had forgiven them.

Matthew's community had seen all of this and had come to the conclusion that they would go through the motions of being a disciple, that they would continue to smile, even though they were grumbling inside, all because they knew that God would fix it in the end. They just knew that God would take care of those who were abusing the system. They just knew that God would make everything right in the end and that they would get more reward because they had been more faithful than those other people.

No, the funny thing about all of this is that Matthew would not have been surprised by the readers' reaction when they read this parable nor would he have been surprised by ours either because Matthew knew that this reaction was simply human nature. People like to try to tell God how to do God's job.

Matthew also knew that in the Biblical narrative there were stories upon stories about how people had tried to control God, show God how to do God's job. There are stories upon stories about how people tell God to smite the other people because they were angry that God showed compassion to those other people.

And Matthew also knew that there are stories after stories about how God humbles these very same people. Jonah sat in the belly of a whale. Miriam got leprosy. Paul was blinded for three days. And there are stories upon stories where God shows that no one owns God and no one can claim ownership of God. There are stories after stories that show that no one can bargain with God and get what they want or get God to act like they think God should act.

That's why Matthew places this parable right after a discussion between the disciples and Jesus about the disciples' rewards in heaven. The disciples just don't get it. So Jesus shares with them this parable in hopes that the disciples would finally understand that discipleship is not about the rewards we think we deserve. It is about reflecting God's grace, even when we don't deserve it. It is about letting

go of our assumptions of other people that prevent us from doing the real ministry that we are called to do, ministry of compassion, ministry of hope, ministry of love, for those that deserve and for those that we think don't deserve it as well. Because God didn't say only help those who deserve it. When God called all of us to be disciples of Christ, God called us to help all of God's children, no ifs, ands, or buts.

The thing about God's grace is that we are okay when it is shown to us and in all honesty, we are thankful that God has shown us grace. the thing that offends us the most about God's grace is when we observe that it is being shown to people we think don't deserve it or when we observe that others are getting more than what we think they deserve. By telling this parable, Matthew is telling us that God is not going to ask our opinion on who should or should not receive grace and we waste so much time and energy on arguing with God on this bit of God's nature, energy that could be put to better use in others ways, ways that build up the Kingdom of God here on earth, not tear it down.

By sharing this parable, Matthew is reminding us that no matter what we do, we cannot control God's grace and God's generosity. God's grace just is and we can't tell God who should be rewarded and who should not because the simple fact is that we are not God! It is God's prerogative to share God's grace with all of

God's children! And God does not need our advice or our opinion on who is out and who is in! We can't control God or God's grace!

That's thing about God's grace-it just is! And that is the Good News! God's grace is not up to you or me or anybody else. And for that I am thankful!

This text invites us as readers to take another glimpse at our understanding of the Kingdom of God. This text invites us as readers to take another look at how we really respond and react to God's equal grace for all. This text invites us as readers to experience once more the true nature of God as a generous, loving God who shows unlimited grace to all of God's children without restrictions, without boundaries, without asking you or me who is really deserving of the grace.

WE are called to reflect God's grace, and to reflect a vision of the Kingdom of God where compassion outshines justice and fairness. We are called to become the people that God created us to be by embracing and reflecting the same compassion and grace that was shown to us the day that God claimed us and named us as one of God's very own.

May we always reflect God's grace to others without begrudgingly withholding for those we think deserve it or not. Amen.