

SERMON TITLE: "Saved by Grace: A Parable of Grace"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 20:1-16
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 1, 2017, at First UMC—World Communion Sunday

INTRODUCTION

As I mentioned last week, I've been watching the PBS series on the Vietnam War. Eighteen hours of history, analysis, and personal experiences revealed a lot about what went on during those years and struggles. One of the men who was interviewed told about when he was airlifted out of Vietnam. He said he couldn't believe he was getting out alive. There were so many other guys who were more righteous than he was, and they died. This particular soldier was just sure that God had made a mistake, and that something terrible was going to happen to the helicopter. Feeling guilty about things he had done in the war, he was sure that God would change his mind and bring some kind of wrath, punishment, and justice upon him before he got completely out of that country. But that didn't happen. Saved by the grace of God, the soldier lived to tell his story all these years later.

Saved by the grace of God. That's been our theme for the past several weeks, as we've been celebrating the 500th anniversary of the *95 Theses* that Martin Luther posted on the door of the Roman Catholic church in Wittenberg, Germany. Today, we continue this Protestant Reformation theme that we are saved by grace, not by the perfection of our works. Our scripture text for today is Jesus' story in Mathew 20. Let's take a look and see what we can learn from this puzzling parable of grace.

1—CONTEXT—BACKWARDS GRACE

Bible scholars tell us that, when the gospel writers compiled the stories and teachings of Jesus, they grouped particular events and sayings together which helped to make specific points. So, one of the best ways to understand any gospel reading is to look at what comes before it and after it. If we look at the context of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, we see that God's grace is upside down and backwards from what we'd normally expect.

We see this first at Matthew 19:13, where Jesus is blessing the little children. Apparently the disciples thought that the kids were wasting Jesus' valuable time, so they tried to send the children away. But Jesus said to let the children come to him, for the kingdom of heaven *belonged* to such as them. What a peculiar thing to say. In Jesus' day nothing belonged to children. Children didn't own property; children were property. So Jesus was really turning the tables on societal norms. By including the children in this radical manner, Jesus meant that the grace of God is available for every person, no matter how old or how young. In other words, the grace of God is not limited by our human prejudices about who's important or worthy and who's not.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is also illuminated by the story which begins at Matthew 19:16. There we read about the rich young man who went to Jesus and asked what good deed he should do in order to have eternal life. After all, he was a man with resources. With all his tools and toys, there was a lot that he could do. But, instead, Jesus told him he should sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow him. After the rich young man went away sad, Jesus explained to his disciples that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. At this comment, the disciples became greatly astounded and wondered, "Who then can be saved?"

Like most people then and now, the disciples had been trained to believe that, if anyone could acquire salvation, it would be the rich. But, once again, Jesus turned the tables upside down on the normal expectations, as he explained that salvation isn't for those who want to add to what they've already accumulated, but for those who are willing to give up what they have in order to follow Christ. The grace of God doesn't operate according to our human standards of what can and should be. The grace of God challenges our preconceived ideas about goodness, access, and privilege.

If we continue to look at the context of today's gospel lesson, we see at Matthew 20:20 the story of the mother of James and John asking Jesus to let her two sons sit at his right and left hands in the

kingdom. This ambitious mother wanted her two boys to be exalted to a place of authority and power. Jesus' response to the disciples was, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave." Again, Jesus reversed societal expectations of who was important and worthy of salvation.

2—GRACE IS AN UNDESERVED GIFT

This context which surrounds the parable of the laborers in the vineyard tells us, then, that our gospel lesson today is a parable of grace, which surprisingly and unexpectedly defies our usual ways of thinking. And isn't that the meaning of grace? Grace is an undeserved gift from God that exceeds anything we could ever earn or have a right to expect.

That's where the first laborers in the vineyard went wrong. Instead of thinking that they'd been cheated, they should've appreciated the fact that they'd graciously been given a chance to earn an honest day's pay. When God goes to the marketplace early in the morning and chooses us to come and work in the vineyard, that's grace. Not everyone is fortunate enough to be chosen first. Instead of worrying throughout the rest of the day about whether or not they'd be able to feed their families, those first-chosen laborers could apply themselves to their labors without concern. They could whistle while they worked. They could develop their skills and take pride in their accomplishments. Instead of getting mad at the end of the day, they should have realized that they had been recipients of God's grace.

In contrast, some had to wait and worry a couple more hours. Others had to endure *several* anxious hours, not sure if they'd get an opportunity to work at all. Think how you would feel if you had to wait desperately until nearly the end of the day to get a chance to earn a little something for yourself and your family. Grace isn't what we get because we work harder. Grace is what God gives us because God chooses to be kind.

When we read this parable of the laborers in the vineyard, we have trouble seeing and understanding God's grace because we're so worried about injustice. We sympathize with the employees

who worked hard all day. We wouldn't like it either if the latecomers received as much compensation as we did. What we miss seeing, though, is that—in God's eyes—we're all latecomers.

We may like to think of ourselves as the responsible, hard-working, faithful type—like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. In so picturing ourselves, however, we fail to remember that, to some extent, every one of us has held back our commitment, our talents, or our labors from God at some time or other. Or, if not our labors, then we've not always aligned our hearts with God's heart in compassion toward those who've had less opportunity. Maybe we've worked extremely hard to do what's right, but we've lacked understanding for those whose bodies, brains, or emotional baggage limited what they were able to do. Maybe while we counted the cost of our dedicated labors, we failed to appreciate the cost and hardship that others have had to endure due to forces beyond their control. To be honest, we're all recipients of spiritual welfare. Any spiritual reward is more than we deserve, no matter who we are and no matter when we started putting in our time. Even for those of us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat, the grace of God is an undeserved gift.

3—GRACE IS THE GREAT EQUALIZER

The fact that all Christians are recipients of undeserved grace means that God's grace is the great equalizer. Whether our great grandparents were charter members of the church or we joined the congregation this year, we are valued by God just the same. Whether we are red or yellow, black or white, God's grace is available to us as equals. Whether our ancestors came over on the Mayflower, we're recent immigrants to the United States, or we're citizens of some other country—God is offering us life in the same beloved community. Whether we're women or men, boys or girls, God is calling us to come work in the same vineyard for the same reward of salvation. No matter our socioeconomic level, our popularity, our political affiliation, our IQ, or our physical abilities—grace is available to us just like to everyone else. Of all the different people who take up God's offer, no one is better in God's sight, and no one is appreciated less.

Grace is the great equalizer among Christians, in much the same way that public education and affirmative action have been used to give various people equal opportunities in society. Whatever our weaknesses, whatever our gaps, God is there to fill them in.

As I listened to the news this week, I kept thinking how much we need this equalizing grace of God in our society. We need equalizing grace for Puerto Ricans who've lost everything and are in critical condition, waiting for relief aid even though they are part of the wealthiest nation on earth. We need equalizing grace for African Americans who are dying in our city streets and being incarcerated at extremely high rates. We need equalizing grace for those who lack health care. And we need equalizing grace for those of us who work hard, pay our taxes, obey the law, and are well-situated, but find ourselves resentful, angry, and judgmental because there are so many others constantly in need.

Fortunately, the good news is that—whatever our problem, whatever our hang-up, whatever our weakness, whatever our sin—God's got us covered. The story of the laborers in the vineyard is a parable in which grace is the great equalizer.

CONCLUSION

Today is World Communion Sunday. In the United Methodist denomination that means it's the day for a special offering to support scholarships for ethnic students. But, of course, it's more than that. World Communion Sunday is the day to celebrate that the Christian faith is shared by almost every type of people all around the globe. Through Holy Communion, we celebrate that we are of one faith, one Lord, and one baptism. From the global north, south, east, and west, we are all members of the one same body of Christ, and how we live on this earth affects the well-being of all the other parts. Whether we are from a rich country like the United States or from one of the very poorest regions of the world, on this World Communion Sunday, we all share in the same sacramental means of grace. May this ritual open our hearts to this undeserved gift of God, so that we may be saved by grace.