

**“Nothing to Earn”
+ Pentecost 15 +
Matthew 20:1-16**

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel for this day.

My father’s 106th birthday was on Friday the 19th of September. As a young man growing up in the rural poverty of western Minnesota he left farm labor for work in the factory in the big city of Milwaukee just as the United States entered into the Great Depression. He had a great fear of banks – terrible fear that he would not have enough money to live. In 1933 he was back on the farm earning \$1 a day for 12 hours a day milking cows and shoveling manure; when he had a few hours off he worked as a service station attendant pumping gas at a station he could walk to from that farm in Door County, WI. Ray Benke didn’t even have a bank account until 1945 when he married my mother. Until then he kept all his money hidden in books throughout the rooms he rented at boarding houses or in his small apartment. The only investment he trusted was U.S. Savings bonds. I regret now that I didn’t listen more closely to his warnings that another Great Depression/Recession would come to the U.S. Who knew?

He never taught me about how to handle money – just to be afraid of not having enough. Fortunately I have a son who is now a business major studying both Macro and Micro Economics and my wife once earned our living in the banking world while she was putting me through seminary. I’m sure their acumen on the subject will suffice. But on a basic level it isn’t that hard: one has to plan their budget based on the principle that income must exceed expenses. If it doesn’t, you’ll have to make other plans, or you have to cut your expenses. That applies to family budgets, church budgets, and businesses as well. And when it comes to running a business, again the principles are fairly straightforward: you reward the employees who perform the best, and to those who don’t perform you give instruction and warning, and finally when all else fails, you let them go.

Not so in our Gospel lesson for today. The parable Jesus throws down before His listeners, is, well, not a favorite of Union Workers (which is what my dad ended up becoming for 35 years at A.O.Smith Co. in Milwaukee). It is a story that doesn’t make business sense or engender worker harmony. This parable is a story that flips the logic of Macro/Micro or any kind of Economics or simple business plan up-side down. Jesus presents us with a vineyard

owner who pays his workers on the principle of generosity, rather than on the principle of merit and then informs us this bizarre tale illustrates “the Kingdom of Heaven.” That phrase might lead us to think of this as some kind of otherworldly realm, but that is not the case. In Matthew’s Gospel, “the Kingdom of Heaven” is just a more reverent way of saying “the Kingdom of God.” They both refer to the same thing: a way of living that puts into practice God’s justice and peace and freedom for all people here and now as well as in God’s eternal realms which, of course, we cannot truly imagine as our life is made up of the very real here and now, bills in the mailbox, books to balance. This Kingdom, revealed in Jesus, illustrates the kind of generosity and mercy God longs to work in our hearts and live out through us in this world. It dares us to trust in storehouses and riches we cannot see knowing, as the Psalmist says, “God owns the cattle on a thousand hills.” God will provide, in God’s time and God’s way from God’s bounty – on that we can rely.

Lovely thoughts but an oh-so-strange kind of Kingdom! In the parable we’re presented with a vast vineyard - large enough to employ all the day laborers the parable’s particular community could supply. The harvest is ripe and ready and this vineyard owner is anxious to get the grapes out of the field as quickly as possible. Naturally he goes to the market at the break of day to hire workers for his field. But, longing to get the harvest complete he keeps going back all day long, sending more workers to help with the harvest.

That much makes perfect sense but when it comes time to pay the workers for their labor, things begin to get strange. The vineyard owner instructs that the workers be paid beginning with the last to be hired—and he pays them all the same thing! Those who worked only 1 hour get a full day’s wage, just like those who put in a full 12 hours! This part makes no sense if you’re trying to run a business. If you tried to run a business on the basis of paying everybody the same thing regardless of how well they worked, your business wouldn’t last very long. Your workers would riot. Somewhere the bottom line for your extravagance would have to be settled.

I am not in the least surprised that one of those who had worked all day complained. I believe I’d be whining – though I’ve never been one to be confrontational with a boss. As is his right the employer simply insists he can be generous with what belongs to him. Speaking to an audience that included Pharisees who believed if everyone in the Jewish nation would simply keep all the laws for just one day the Messiah would come the idea of there being nothing to earn

in God's Kingdom – that God/the Vineyard owner simply gives from a gracious and merciful heart to all, equally, well, it was beyond outrageous.

This parable indicates, in its way that all who were alive at the time God sent His only-begotten into the world to save us – and all of us who live in these “End Times” thereafter are, in a very real sense, “eleventh-hour workers” regardless of what good deeds or hard work for the Kingdom we may have quite earnestly done. It is always easy to rant against the stupidity of Abraham & Isaac who each tried to pass off their wives as their sisters but all they had was a promise – nothing in writing, no Bible, no 10 Commandments – those came long after they were dead. Even when they had the Law and the prophets – had seen God save them through Messiah types (Joseph, Moses, David) and had scrolls of scripture and songs to sing – well, they still had not seen the Son of God – made flesh – incarnate. We have the witness of Jesus' life, death and resurrection passed down from eye-witnesses, recorded for us in Scripture that we can hold in our hands – the church has had and continues to have the outpouring of the Spirit granting us the gift of faith in the miraculous washing we can only begin to understand – where we are named, claimed and placed in God's Kingdom for now and eternity.

We are called to live together, to work alongside one another in God's Kingdom – to live like little children who trust without guile, who tenderly accept and receive love. They are the example by which we all must measure ourselves. In this strange Kingdom of God, those who serve not those who can hire servants are the ones who are viewed as great. Faced with terror throughout the world and fragile economies it is no wonder we wonder how this kind of Kingdom can make a difference, even survive in our world where the first are first and the last are last.

How can the human mind wrap itself around love so amazing, so Divine? How can we receive God's grace, unconditional love, unfailing mercy – always, and only as a gift given to us all freely, generously, with no strings attached! It is as that great Non-Lutheran Desmond Tutu put it, “There is nothing we can do to make God love us more” and “there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.”

It is, literally, all of Grace – as this poem so beautifully states:

Like sun that shines the same on every face,
both vineyard and the work, the owner's gift.

We learn at end of day it's all of grace.

Upon the earth each person has their place
as surely as each star its nightly shift,
and sunlight falls the same on every face.

By mercy we're all winners of the race;
by mercy every lowly gets a lift:
by mercy do we learn it's all of grace.

God's vineyard spans the globe; there's lots of space
for all who hear God's call to heal its rifts
like sunlight chasing pain from every face.

Let none begrudge the width of God's embrace
which reaches from the safe to those adrift.
We learn at end of day it's all of grace.

Until our human love can keep apace
with God's, may labor be a sharing of the gift
that shines like sun the same on every face.
At end of day, we praise: it's all of grace.

May God's limitless grace shown to us, made known to us alone through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior be at the heart and be the joy in our labors. Worried about whether there's enough grace in God's bank, enough provision to carry out the labor God has for us to do in God's Kingdom? Well, it's like the Scriptures state 365 times, "Be not afraid!" AMEN.