

Wesley United Methodist Church
September 20, 2020
Living With Christ -Grace
Scripture: Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

I invite you to join me in exploring today's gospel using a little bit of imagination and poetic license. Let's look at this through the eyes of Levi. Listen to how he might describe that day.¹ Every morning I come to the marketplace hoping, praying, that someone will hire me to work. There are many of us here, all eager to work. It is time to harvest the grapes and it's important to get them harvested quickly at just the right time. Too late and the rains will come, and any grapes left on the vines will be destroyed. That is good for me, because it means that I stand a good chance of being hired today.

I am good at many things but there is not always work for the many men like me looking for a job. If I get hired, I will likely receive one denarius. It's not a lot of money, but it is just enough for me to buy food for my family so that we can eat for one more day.

The landowners are here, and I try to attract their attention. I want desperately to work today. I have a wife and five children – the youngest is only a baby. The oldest is almost old enough to join me here in the marketplace and possibly get hired for a day. How wonderful it will be when he is old enough to work. If we both get hired, we might be able to save a little bit of our pay so that we can buy food on a day when we do not get hired.

The landowners have all left now and I am still here. I did not get hired. It is about 6 in the morning and it will be a long day waiting and hoping that someone will come who has some work for me to do.

It has been three hours – it is now 9 o'clock and one of the landowners is back and hiring more men to work in his vineyard. He does not tell them what he will pay them, just that "I will pay you whatever is right." Sadly, I am not one of the men he has hired. I wouldn't really care what he paid me, it might not be enough to feed my family, but it might be enough to feed my children and maybe my wife and I could still have a little bit to eat.

It is very hot here; the sun is high in the sky – a little after noon, and I am still sitting here along with others who have not been hired today. My wife will be so disappointed, and it is so hard to look into the faces of my children when they are hungry, and I have nothing for them. Surprisingly, the landowner came back and hired a few more men, but still not me.

The day is long, and it is so hard and frustrating. My heart is breaking, and I am ashamed to have to go home to tell my children that there is no food. It is three o'clock and the landowner came once again, but once again I was not hired. Maybe he thinks that I cannot work hard, but I can, and I do.

The day is almost over. It is almost 5 o'clock. I will have to accept that I am not going to be working today. Maybe I should just give up and go home, but then we would definitely go hungry. The landowner has come back three times to hire people and the sky is looking like it is getting ready to rain. Maybe, maybe he will come once again – although with only an hour left to work, what he pays me will be so small that probably only the littlest children will be able to eat.

Thank you, God, that I did not leave. The landowner came once again and asked the other men and me “Why are you standing here idle all day?” We told him “because no one has hired us.” He told us to also go into the vineyard.

There is not much day left but I am working as hard and as fast as I can. Maybe when he sees how much I can pick in one hour he will remember me and hire me again. I do not know what he will pay me, but whatever it is at least the babies will be able to have a bite to eat and maybe they won't cry tonight because their tummies hurt so much.

It is evening, we line up to receive our wages. How can this be? Who is this landowner? Could he have made a mistake? He has given me a full day wage – even though I worked only one hour! This is amazing! Unbelievable! Thank you, God! My wife and children and I will have enough to eat today. Tonight, we will not be hungry. One day at a time. Tomorrow I will be back in the marketplace, hoping that someone has work for me to do; but tonight, we will eat!

As I make my way through the market and towards home, I see my friend Benjamin. Benjamin was one of the lucky men who was hired early this morning. He is

tired from working all day, but at least he knew all day that he would have enough money at the end of the day to feed his family. I am tired too, not so much from working, because I worked only for one hour, but I am tired also from being in the heat all day and from worrying all day about not working and not having food for my children.

Benjamin tells me that he saw that me, and the men who were hired with me late in the day, were paid a full day wage. He thought that meant that surely, he would receive more money – a bonus because he worked all day in the scorching heat. But he received the same pay as I did. It wasn't fair, he said, and he told the landowner what he thought.

The landowner didn't get upset but didn't budge either. He said, he had done no wrong to Benjamin – he paid him what they had agreed. He said that if he wanted to pay me and the others hired later in the day the same as he paid Benjamin, that was his choice. If he wanted to be generous, that was up to him.

Benjamin is not happy; but I wish that Benjamin could instead be happy for me and for my children and wife. I wish that Benjamin could be glad for us that we will also have enough food to eat tonight. I wish that Benjamin could think about what it would have been like if he had not been hired early in the morning and had to worry all day about going home and seeing his disappointed and hungry wife and children. I know that Benjamin has been in that position before. There are days when he has not been hired, so I wonder why he cannot just be happy for me.

Tonight, there will special prayers around our table – prayers of thanksgiving for the landowner who paid me enough to feed my family. God bless him!

It might be helpful to notice how you feel when you hear this story. Were you relieved that Levi would have enough money to feed his family for the day? Did you identify with Benjamin and think that he should have been paid more? Was Levi treated fairly? Was Benjamin?

This is one of those stories that Jesus told that can be hard to hear. It may go against what we think is fair. How can it be fair that Levi who worked only one hour received the same pay as Benjamin who worked in the hot sun all day? And yes, we all know that life isn't always fair, but does that make it any easier to accept?

Matthew places this story in his gospel, right after Peter has asked what reward he and the other disciples will receive for following Jesus. After the story, he tells that James and John's mother came asking Jesus to let her sons have a place of honor in his kingdom. It's all about getting what they deserve, getting a place of honor because they have been faithful followers of Jesus and so they should get better treatment than someone else.

But maybe this story tells us something different. We live in a culture where people are always trying to get more – more money, more food, more clothes, a better car, a bigger home, more possessions. If this is a story about economics, then it is about having enough – enough food to feed your family. The landowner in this story, chooses to be generous with his money. He gives each worker enough money so that their families will not be hungry. If he had paid proportionately based on the number of hours each man worked then some, like Levi, would have walked away with practically nothing.

That might be fair if Levi had been off enjoying himself all day, but he had been there, ready to work, eager to work. It was not his fault that no one had hired him. Whether he worked all day or only one hour, his family would still be hungry when he returned home. The landowner, out of his generosity, or out of his heart, out of not wanting children to go hungry provided enough money for the family to eat. The landowner did not give Levi what he deserved, but he acted with grace and gave him what he needed.

If we understand the landowner in this story to be God, then maybe Jesus wants us to see that God's priorities are not the same as ours. God wants all people to be included. God wants all people to come into the field, come into the kingdom, be part of God's family. There is no partial acceptance by God. There is no hierarchy of welcome or inclusion with God. For those of us who have known God's love for many years, that is the benefit that we have received. But if we have known that love, if we have known God's presence with us during difficult times, then we should want others to also know that love, know God's presence with them as well.

No matter how many people know God's love it does not diminish God's love for us. No matter how many people come to know that God will walk with them every day comforting, strengthening, guiding, it does not mean that God does this any less for us.

I remember an illustration told about a family where a new child was to be born. The older child was worried that his parents would love him less when the baby was born because he thought that love was a limited commodity. The parents lit two candles – representing the love that they had. Then they took those candles and lit a third to show their son that they loved him. Then they took the candles and lit another representing the new baby. The child realized that his candle did not grow dimmer because another candle had been lit. Nor did the light in the parents' candles diminish because they had shared their light, their love, with other candles.

I believe that this story, this parable tells us something similar. God wants all people to be included. God wants all people to have enough – to have the necessities of life – food, shelter, clothing, warmth, love, human dignity, safety, justice, freedom. God's grace reaches out to us, not giving us what we deserve, but giving us what we need, what God wants to give us out of love. God's grace is not something that we earn or deserve. It is a free gift given to us by the God who loves us.

When most of us hear this story, we hear it from the perspective of the person who was hired early in the morning. We hear it from the perspective of the person who worked hard all day. But what if we hear it from the perspective of Levi, who wanted to work, who wanted to provide for his family, but who, through no fault of his own was not hired, was not going to be able to provide the barest necessities?

During this pandemic, we have seen all too clearly, very large numbers of people who have lost their jobs either temporarily or permanently. We have seen businesses that have had to close. The pandemic that brought this about was not their fault – and yet, like Levi, they suddenly find themselves unable to provide for their families. We know that the number of people waiting in lines at food pantries has drastically increased. We also know that there have been hospitals or nursing homes where people could not get enough protective equipment.

The apostle Paul, writing to the Philippians was writing from prison. He was in prison for teaching about Jesus and he did not know whether he would be released or

would be sentenced to death. He urges those to whom he is writing to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel”. He recognizes and acknowledges that sometimes people suffer because of their beliefs. Sometimes they suffer because of something beyond their control. But he urges them and us to continue to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel.

I believe that this means that we should also be agents of love, agents of peace, and agents of grace acting in ways that are worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to act in ways that bring love to those we may consider unlovable – knowing that God does not consider any person beyond the reach of God’s love. We are called to live our lives peaceably bringing peace to others through our attitude, through our actions, through our words. We are called to celebrate the grace we have received from God and to share that grace with others – so that all may have enough, recognizing that when everyone has enough that does not take away from us, we will still have enough because God is a God of abundance, not scarcity. God’s love, peace, grace do not diminish when shared with others, in fact they multiply.

The two candles I spoke of earlier give a certain amount of light. The third candle adds to the light, and the fourth candle brings even more brightness. When we live and act so that others may also experience the grace, peace and love of Christ the world become brighter. When we live and act so that all people can have enough food, shelter, clothing, warmth, love, human dignity, safety, justice, and freedom, then our world will also be a better place, one that more closely resembles the kingdom of God. Let us pray:

God of love, God of peace, God of grace, open our hearts to your will. Guide us so that we may live in a manner worthy of the gospel – of the good news – that you want to share with all people. When greed or selfishness tempt us help us to remember the workers in the field and your desire for all to have enough. In a hurting, broken world, help us to be agents of your love, peace, and grace. Amen.

ⁱ This narrative about Levi was written by me and used in a sermon three years ago for this scripture.