

September 24, 2017

Come to the Table

Text: Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

Title: The Table of Grace

My name is Levi. Every morning I come to the market place hoping, praying, that someone will hire me to work the day. There are many of us here, all eager to work. It is near the end of September and it is time to harvest the grapes. It is important to get the grapes harvested quickly because soon 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.

Every day I come to the market place. 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 market place 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 market place, 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 I, 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!

What was your reaction when you first heard the scripture read? Have you, perhaps, like me, sometimes thought that those hired in the morning deserved more pay than those hired later in the day? Does your feeling about that change when you realize that even what the all-day workers were being paid was barely enough to just feed their family? It wasn't enough to save for a vacation or buy anything extra.

Why did Jesus tell this story? What does this really have to do with the kingdom of heaven? Jesus frequently challenged conventional wisdom and this is no exception.

He might have wanted his disciples to realize that they shouldn't expect a special place of honor or privilege because they were the first to follow him. Maybe there is a message for us in the church – especially for those of us who have been around for a while. It is a reminder that God loves all of us – not because we arrived early, not because we have done anything exceptional, not because we deserve it, but simply because God is God and God loves every single person. God loves us whether we have been loving and following God all of our lives, have just started to know God, or do not yet even know God.

Those who were hired early in the morning resented that those hired late in the day received the same pay. We must be careful not to resent or resist the new ideas and thoughts that someone new to the faith might bring. Their new ideas may be one of the ways that God is speaking to us.

More importantly though, I believe that this story shows us the infinite compassion of God. The landowner in the story knew what the workers needed in order to be able to feed their families. I believe he had compassion for those who had not been hired – they had been there. They had been faithful in showing up, and waiting -even all day – hoping to be hired. It was not their fault that they had not been hired and it certainly was not the fault of their children who would be hungry without the wage that a day worker needed just to feed his family.

God knows what we need. God knows even better than we do what we need, and in God's infinite compassion and love, I believe that God desires that all people have the basic necessities of life. As the landowner gave those hired late in the day far more than they would ever expect, I believe that God gives us far more than we can even imagine.

I think that sometimes people have no desire to be involved with a church because they cannot imagine what they would receive for their lives through involvement with a faith community. Perhaps people have heard or experienced bad landowners, churches where they were treated in ways that do not reflect God's great love and compassion. Some people have never known what it is like to have someone hold them in prayer, to have someone to talk to when life is tough, to have a community of faith to love them, sustain them, surround them with love.

For those of us who do know what it is like to be part of a loving faith community, our desire is for others to know that same relationship – to know and experience God's love. We are the hand and feet of God reaching out to our world. We are the ones through whom others will come to know God's love.

This parable challenges the conventional values of fairness and justice and forces us instead to consider grace. It is not about what we deserve. It is not about a contract with God that says, "we do this, and God will do that." It is about God's grace – undeserved, unmerited, and greater than anything we can imagine.

The early workers did begrudge the landowner his generosity – maybe because they did not see or experience generosity. They received justice. They received what was fair – what was agreed to beforehand.

Grace is not something that we can bargain for. Grace is always amazing because it is something we cannot expect.

I invite us to think of times when we have received the unexpected, the undeserved. I invite us to think of times and ways that we can share that grace with others – ways that we can do something for others – not because we will get something in return, but simply because the person

needs what we can offer – whether it is financial, or a gift of time, presence, listening, love. Anything offered to another out of love – as a response to God’s love for us is grace. All that God gives us is grace – we cannot earn it; we do not deserve it. It is not pay – it is a gift.

On a friend’s Facebook page, this week I read: “At the table of grace, the cup’s never empty. The plate’s always full, and it’s never too late to come and be filled with love never ending. You’re always welcome at the table of grace.”ⁱ

ⁱ Craig and Dean Phillis. Copied from a Facebook post.