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Matthew 20:1-16

OFFENSIVE

If the parable we read today about the laborers in the vineyard offends you, then it's mission was accomplished. This parable is *designed* to offend. It was offensive to those who first heard Jesus tell this story, it has offended Christians over the past two thousand years, and it is likely to offend most of us listening to it today. This story about laborers who were hired at different times of the day but then were all paid the exact same amount at the end of the day, even those who worked only one hour, this story offends us. Most of us hearing this story will think, "That's not fair!" I'm sure Jesus understood how offensive this story was to people's sensibilities and I believe that is just what he was aiming to achieve. Jesus doesn't want to leave us where we are right now. He wants to transform us. And when we are offended, we become awakened and engaged, and thus we become ripe for transformation.

This offensive parable is instructive. It is instructive first in what it teaches us about God and then in what it teaches us about ourselves.

Let's first look at what we learn about God from this unsettling parable. Jesus tells us right up front that this story tells us what the kingdom of heaven is like. So he clearly intends us to learn something from it about the nature of God. The landowner in the parable is astonishingly generous. The first laborers are promised the usual daily wage and they work all day in the hot sun. And when the day is done, they are not cheated. They are indeed paid the usual daily wage as they were promised. But so too are those who worked just one hour! And this is what offends us because it seems so unfair.

The message Jesus is teaching us isn't really about money. It is about God's grace—the word “grace” being our shorthand way for talking about God's love and forgiveness. Grace is the real currency in this story. God's love is extended toward *everyone*. Unlike money, God's grace cannot be split into fractions. One person doesn't receive 100 percent of God's love and forgiveness while someone else receives only 50 percent and other only 25 percent. God's love cannot be halved or split or parsed into smaller portions to individuals based on their performance. It's all or . . . I was going to say “it's all or nothing” but that is precisely the point. God never gives *nothing* to anyone. With God, it's *all and all*.

The writer of Matthew's gospel aimed this story at his own early Christian community. In that community, Jewish followers of Jesus were wrestling with the notion of including gentiles. And that was not an easy prospect. The Jewish people understood themselves as children of Yahweh, whose ancestors had a special relationship with God, and had worshiped God and followed God's ways faithfully for generations. They likely regarded themselves as the laborers who had worked all day, doing what was asked of them. But then here come along these late-comers, these Gentiles—who had previously been pagans and worshipped false gods but who now wanted to be followers of the God of Jesus. And the question the community faced was could these late-comers to God also be recipients of God's saving love? Could they receive the same “daily wage” so to speak?

According to this parable, the answer is “yes.” God's grace is not divisible. It is all and all. This is the offensive part of what we learn about God. God's grace is there for everyone. How offensive it is to consider that the people we find most unlikeable, the people we think of as least deserving of getting any kind of a break, the people we can't stand, receive the same

generous love of God as we do. The parable teaches us something crucial about God: that the scope of God's grace is immense.

The parable also teaches us some things about ourselves. The offense we feel about this parable reveals some not-so-wonderful things about ourselves. We should be offended by the offense this parable generates in us.

We are offended by this parable because we are big believers in the merit system. We believe that our accomplishments, our education, our efforts at work or at home or in our community or at church have earned us special status. We are good people. We are good citizens. And we have bought into the myth that we have gotten where we are in life through our own efforts and good sense.

But this is an offensive myth that we live within. None of us has gotten where we are in life on our own. Many factors have played a role in shaping what we have accomplished. Some of us have known certain advantages that have helped us on our way: maybe the color of our skin, or the support of our family, or generational wealth—which could be something as basic as having grandparents who owned their own home. In the Bible, God constantly tells the Israelite people to help the poor and the disadvantaged by telling them, “Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and that I brought you out from that place.” In other words, God reminds them that they didn't get where they are in life on their own.

The problem with the merit system is that it kills compassion. The merit system destroys our capacity to love. The merit system hampers our willingness to forgive. And instead, the merit system fosters our judgment and condemnation of others. We should be offended by our love of the merit system.

The other offensive thing we learn about ourselves from this parable is that we aren't *really* opposed to grace after all, but rather, our objection lies with who is receiving God's grace. We have to assume that if the first laborers had received a special bonus at the end of the day, they would have been overjoyed. Instead they grumbled when they received exactly what the landowner had promised them. The grumblers weren't against grace; they were against grace being shown to others! And this is a terrible thing we learn about ourselves: how small and puny our hearts have become when we resent God's goodness and love being shown to others.

The offense we feel about this parable also reveals something else about ourselves: it reveals our arrogance. That fact that we are offended by the landowner's generosity reveals that we have already cast ourselves in the role of the laborers hired at the beginning of the day, that we see ourselves as those most deserving of God's rewards, as those who have earned good standing with God and one another. If we identified with those hired at the end of the day we would not be feeling offended. Instead we would be feeling great gratitude. The fact that we do not immediately identify with the late-comers reveals our great arrogance and pride. We never considered for a moment that maybe, maybe *we are* those late-comers, those undeserving of God's generosity—that maybe there are those who love better than we love, who are more forgiving, more compassionate, more generous, whose lives are more faithful to Christ's ways that we have lived out in our lives. In a great many ways, we comfortable Christians in North America have been slow to embrace the radical nature of God's love, have often failed to walk the way of Christ, and have resisted the profound meaning of the gospel. And yet God *still* showers us with abundant grace nevertheless.

The offense we feel toward this parable *should* offend us. In the face of God's immense generosity, great patience, abundant love and forgiveness *toward us*, the only appropriate sentiment is overwhelming gratitude.