

Scandalous Grace
Cooke's-Portsmouth

September 24, 2017

Matthew 20:1-16

Had I been there on the day that Jesus shared this parable I would have cried foul at its conclusion. Despite the fact that the landowner and the first hires negotiated and agreed upon a fair price for a day's labour, there seems something inherently unfair about those who toiled for the entire day and those who worked only one hour being paid the same. If we are honest we do resent the generosity of God. This parable of the generous landowner is about precisely that: the generosity of God. But it is hard for us to appreciate that when we first hear it. The grace is obscured by the larger din of unfairness.

We focus on what the parable is not about: It is not about equality or proper disbursement of wages. It is not about economic exchange and equal pay for equal work. It is about the bestowal of grace and mercy to all no matter what time they have put in and how deserving or undeserving we judge them to be. We do not earn the grace of God it is lavished fairly and equally on all.

God's generosity can violate our own sense of right and wrong; justice and fairness. Indeed it runs counter to what is generally accepted as fair. This parable is as nigglesome to our sense of fairness as it would have been to its original hearers. We hear it read and every fibre of our being bristles and our immediate response is that it is unfair; as if we truly know and understand the heart and wisdom of God. That is why there is a scandalous component to grace: precisely because it is beyond the realm of complete human understanding. And I think that even his own handpicked and most trusted disciples often misunderstood the divinity of grace.

To better understand the parable I think it prudent to read what precedes it in scripture. The discipline of the lectionary dictates that not every verse of every chapter is read and pondered as we live through the liturgical year. An entire chapter has been omitted between the reading for last Sunday and the reading for this morning.

In chapter 19 Jesus blesses the children to the chagrin of the disciples. They had judged that Jesus was too important and busy a man to be bothered by children. But Jesus rebukes his disciples and claims that the kingdom of heaven belongs to children. He takes the time to interact with and bless them before carrying on his way. This may have left a bit of a sting on the figurative cheeks of the men who had left everything to follow: they took the risk but the kingdom belongs to children.

This periscope is followed by the exchange between Jesus and the rich man who asks what good deed he must perform to get eternal life. He lives by the tenets of the law strictly adhering to the Ten Commandments. In self-righteous pride he announces that he has kept the commandments and asks if there is anything further that he should aspire to do-I daresay assuming that he had already done so and with aplomb. But Jesus bursts his balloon of self-important piety when he says that he must sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor to gain riches in heaven. And you know what happens: he turns away grievously because to part with wealth and standing is more than he can bear and do. In response to this aside Jesus turns to his disciples and says that it is most challenging for the wealthy to gain the kingdom and the disciples are zinged once again.

They want to know who can ever be saved if the kingdom belongs to children and the wealthy must become destitute how is it possible for anyone to gain the kingdom? And Peter, who was no stranger to debating with Jesus reminds him of what he has sacrificed for Jesus. He says, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus assures him that

sacrifice will not escape his all -seeing eyes when he is seated on the throne, but the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Then follows this parable. Peter and the boys must have gulped and shaken their heads in a similar incredulity as we after hearing it read this morning.

There is no implicit difference between those who have left everything to follow and those who get on board at the eleventh hour. We do begrudge the generosity of God, because at some level of our being we still think that there is a greater reward to be given to the one has given more; those who have toiled in the sun; left everything familiar and routine to follow; worked for a lifetime rather than for a few hours. And yet this is thinking like a human; like a labourer and not the landowner.

I confess that I was having great difficulty with this text when I sat down to write on Monday. Several hours in and I had but two paragraphs written and every idea beyond those two paragraphs fizzled and died. I went to books, commentaries and the Internet; read copious sermons by others but did not get the ping factor that would cure my writers block and open my soul to the murmuring of the spirit. I found a sermon preached Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor by Davidson College Presbyterian Church in North Carolina on September 18, 2011 that contained an illustration that gave me pause. I copied it and left it for further musing until the following morning. I share it with you now.

It cites an article from the magazine, Scientific American, titled Commemorative Calculus: How an Algorithm helped arrange the names on the 9/11 Memorial. Like pastor Lib calculus is a weakness in my life and I was unconvinced that I would comprehend the formula. Thanks to her rendering the article into the corpus of her sermon, First and Last, I can share it with a degree of certainty that will be understood.

The article's author John Matson writes, "At first glance—and even after deep scrutiny—the names on a new memorial to those killed on September 11, 2001, seem randomly arrayed. The names are not arranged alphabetically nor, for the most part, are they presented in labeled groups. But the memorial's layout is anything but random. The 2,893 names—etched across bronze panels surrounding two memorial pools of water...are strung together in a way that reflects thousands of complex interpersonal relationships forged before the attacks and, on at least one occasion, during the immediate aftermath... The planners of the memorial...solicited requests from victim's loved ones for 'meaningful adjacencies'—names that should appear together on the memorial. Roughly 1,200 responses came back, asking that a victim's name be grouped with specific colleagues, with family members or with friends who also perished in the attacks. The web of meaningful adjacencies at firms such as Cantor Fitzgerald [where 704 people perished] were large and complex—loved ones made half a dozen or so adjacency requests for some... The number of interlocking adjacency requests...meant that laying out the names by hand would be nearly impossible. So they enlisted the help of a complex algorithm...which works in two stages.

The first stage...builds clusters of names from the adjacency requests. That produced puzzle pieces which a second, space-filling algorithm took and fit into place within the confines of the bronze panels of the memorial. The design seems disorderly in the arrangement of the victims' names, thus acknowledging the chaos and randomness of their death, but ultimately it bears witness to the order behind the victims' lives—their work, their friends, their families.

Jake Barton is quoted as saying, "You have this enormously organic, complex, human web of meaning. You get this incredibly powerful sense of undifferentiation. Based on this event, all these names are equal."

The 9/11 memorial mirrors in a contemporary and profound manner the vision which Jesus is putting forward when he answers Peter's question, "We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus' answer, given to first-century and 21st-century disciples in story form, is this: Based on God's grace, all of us are equal, woven in love into an enormously organic, complex, human web of meaning. No one is any more or less deserving of grace than the next person. No one will be rewarded greater for years of faith and service over days, weeks or months.

In her sermon Lib McGregor includes this illustration about meaningful adjacencies.

Victor Wald and Harry Ramos, had never met before September 11. The two men met in the stairwell of the North Tower as they were both trying to escape the stricken building. Wald was sitting on the stairs at the 53rd floor, unable to continue, when Ramos and one of his colleagues, Hong Zhu, decided to stop and help Wald down any way they could. They carried him. They commandeered an off-limits elevator. The three men eventually reached the 36th floor before Wald said that he could go no further. Zhu escaped at the urging of a firefighter, but Ramos stayed with Wald, telling him, "Victor, don't worry. I'm with you." The two men died when the tower fell about half an hour later; their names appear together on panel 63 of the North Memorial Pool. Strangers united in the wake of chaos and memorialized forever as brothers. The 9/11 memorial is a testament to undifferentiation and the scandalous truth of grace.

There is no greater love than to recognize that we are brothers and sisters. No greater love than sacrificing one's life for another. No greater love than recognizing the value and worth in the eleventh hour worker as equal to that of the one who was conscripted at the rising of the sun. There is no hint that those who were hired late in the evening were lazy. They simply could not

find employment for the day. The workers who came in late will now have enough money to buy food for their families. By God's grace, we are equal.

This parable is scandalous to our post-modernist sensibility.

Scandalous to our mundane thinking as the created compared to the deeply seated and gracious generosity of the divine.

God's scandalous grace weaves an organic web of meaning among us all. Like the 9/11 memorial we are connected by scandalous grace to meaningful adjacencies whether we slave for a lifetime or a day. Such is the good news of the Parable of Laborers in the Vineyard. Such is the good news of the Gospel. Thanks be to God. Amen.