

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 20, 2026
Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

"Grateful For Grace"

Years ago, when I was leading a youth group we planned a work day at the church. Afterward, we planned to have a pizza/ice cream party. With the busy schedule teens have, some arrived early in the morning, others later in the morning, still others in the early afternoon and even some an hour before the project was finished. When the work was done, everyone was treated to pizza and ice cream, even those who had worked only an hour.

That's when the grumbling started. The all-day workers felt cheated because those who worked only an hour got the same reward as them. Some parents even got into the act, complaining about favoritism. That's when I read "the parable of the workers in the vineyard" to address those complaints.

Most of us know its details so well we could spin them off rapidly. A vineyard owner goes to the marketplace early in the morning and hires workers for a day's wage. He does the same at 10, 2 and 4 pm. Then when it comes time to pay the workers, the last workers hired receive the same pay as the first. The first-hired workers grumble and complain. The owner's response is, "Everyone got a day's wage, just like they agreed to. Why do you begrudge me doing as I wish with my money?" That's the end of the parable, but it's only the beginning of our grumbling about it. It just doesn't seem fair to pay everyone the same. It almost sounds like socialism.

The first thing we should note about this shocking parable is that it did not promote a particular economic system, nor was it a recommendation for a style of labor management. This is not a parable about the practice of business. It is a parable about the practice of grace. The astounding generosity of the landowner/God shocks us and reveals the reality of the grace of God. God's grace is not something earned; it is something given.

And yet, that, too, seems unfair, doesn't it? There is something inherently unfair about grace. It doesn't seem fair that those who worked all day long in the scorching sun should be paid the same wage as those who worked only a couple of hours. This is a maddening parable because it challenges all our notions of fairness. It doesn't seem fair at all, because we identify with the early workers.

After all, we are here because we are responsible people. We are conscientious, dependable, hardworking, over-achievers who have been laboring in the vineyard since early morning, we think. We didn't get where we are by relying on grace - we got here by hard work. Our concept of the unfairness of this whole episode is predicated on our identification with the 6 am workers. After all, we are Presbyterian! We are hard workers, who participate in community service projects, attend worship, and support the church with our time, talents and finances.

But what if, we are not among the first-hired? How would that change our perspective of this parable? Over the span of history, we are the last workers. Would it be fair to penalize us just because of when we were born? So, why penalize the late workers? Shouldn't we inherit the kingdom of God just like every Christian who has preceded us?

If we look at this parable through the eyes of those who have only been on the job for an hour, we come away with a different perspective. Suddenly, the grace of God seems like a very fine thing! We think that we deserve most of what we have. We forget about the people who love us more than we deserve, and the God who forgives more than we deserve and saved us more than we deserve.

This parable is crafted in such a way that it demands each successive generation that hears it to see themselves as the latest to be called by God to work in the vineyard; the most recent to be on the receiving end of God's generous grace. Whenever we become disciples, we are given the same grace as everyone else. Whether we've been a disciple of Jesus all our lives or for only the last few days, God's grace covers us. Whether we are at dawn or sunset in our lives, God stands in the "town center" of our lives, patiently seeking us out to labor in this unique vineyard.

God is always looking for more workers for His vineyard. God treats us all with the same grace, whether we join the Christian labor force at dawn or as the shadows begin to lengthen in our lives. There is plenty of work to be done in advancing God's kingdom. From the youngest to the oldest among us, there is also plenty of grace to go around. So, this is first and foremost a parable about the grace of God.

But it is also a parable of judgment because when the Lord of the Vineyard finally loses his cool, he vents his anger not on the "Johnny-come-lately's," but on the "early birds," who are grumbling about grace. He is fed up with those "insiders" who can't accept the breadth of the Lord's grace. He says, "do you begrudge my generosity?" Actually, what he says is, "Is your eye evil because I am good?"

It is this "evil eye," this evil "bookkeeper's eye" that is always fixed on the accounts, always keeping score that has got God's goat. There is no debt so high that the balance cannot be cancelled. The reality is that we are all indebted to God. We all live in the red.

If we served a punishing God, that would be cause for concern, but we serve a loving God whose forgiveness is limitless.

Think of it this way. Parking in downtown anywhere is getting more and more expensive. Occasionally, we visit a business that offers to validate our parking so we owe nothing. That's what Jesus does for us - He validates our parking ticket and cancels our debt. Jesus' validation is available to us no matter who we are or how long we have been a disciple. Jesus cancels our debt, time after time.

Once, I heard of a mother who had raised a large number of children and who understood the kind of graciousness exemplified in today's parable. She was asked, "I suppose you loved all your children equally, making sure that you gave all of them exactly the same treatment?" The wise mother replied, "I loved all of them, loved them greatly, but I never wanted to love them equally. I loved the one that was down until he got up. I loved the one who was weak until she was strong. I loved the one that was hurt until he was healed. I loved the one who was lost until she was found." That's how God is with us, loving us back to life

Grace goes beyond equality and fairness. Grace means that God doesn't love us equally - He loves us extravagantly, no matter when we enter His vineyard. I'm grateful for that kind of grace. How about you?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen