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Matthew 20:1-16
Proper 20; Year B
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The Scandal of Grace

Beloved preacher and teacher Fred Craddock tells a story about being on a flight back when they still had smoking sections on airplanes. He was seated on the aisle in the no smoking section. Early in the flight, the man directly across from him pulled a long cigar out of his pocket and proceeded to light up. Almost instantly, the area was filled with foul-smelling cigar smoke. Craddock stopped the flight attendant, an attractive young woman, and said, “Am I in the wrong section? I asked for no smoking.” Realizing what he was saying, she said to the man with the big cigar, “Uh, sir, this is the no smoking section.” He completely ignored her, however, and kept right on puffing away. Craddock complained again. Again she reminded the man that he was in the no smoking section. But it did no good, and Craddock was furious.

Later on during the flight, the flight attendant was coming down the aisle with a tray of drinks. She was right between Craddock and the man with cigar when the plane hit an air pocket. The sudden turbulence caused her to dump the drinks right in the lap of the cigar-smoking man. But that’s not all. Trying to correct her balance, the attractive young flight attendant fell backward . . . right into Craddock’s lap. At that moment, Craddock thought to himself with a grin, “Now, don’t tell me there’s no God.”

Sometimes, things just seem to work out right. The bad guys get what’s coming to them and the good guys head for the sunset. Justice is done and all is right with the world . . . until we leave the theater. Fred Craddock’s story notwithstanding, things rarely work out so neatly. Real life is messy and painful. The righteous are not always rewarded and

the wicked are not always punished. Justice is not always done. We open the newspaper, we turn on the TV, we look at our own lives and those of our neighbors, and we can hardly help but conclude that more often than not life is simply not fair. Of course, someday, we imagine, everything will be different. When God's kingdom comes in its fullness, when God truly reigns, then all will be set to rights. All people everywhere will finally receive what they truly deserve, what their actions and attitudes merit. Justice will indeed be done and life will finally be fair. Isn't that what the kingdom is all about? Isn't that what we have to look forward to? Well, maybe not. As Jesus tells us in today's Gospel reading, fairness is not exactly at the top of God's kingdom agenda.

It's harvest time in the local vineyard, Jesus says, and the owner needs help with the grapes. He goes into town around six in the morning and picks up a capable crew, agreeing to pay them a full day's wage for a full day's work. So off to the vineyard they go. They pluck and they sort, they sort and they pluck. But the vineyard is large, and three hours later the owner realizes that he if he is going to finish by sundown, he had better pick up the pace. So he returns to the labor pool and hires more workers. Three hours later, at noon, he decides that still more help is needed, then again at three o'clock, then again at five. When quitting time comes an hour later, he tells his foreman to pay the workers, beginning with the last to be hired. The foreman pays them a full day's wage. And those hired first begin salivating. "Wow," they think, "this is great. If the owner paid those lazy rascals a full day's wage for one measly hour of work, imagine what we are about to receive. We sweated and toiled for twelve solid hours, we'll surely be paid for a week." But when their turn arrives, the foreman approaches and pays them what they had agreed to, one day's wage for one day's work. The six a.m. crew is incensed. And why shouldn't they be? They have been swindled. They have been duped. So what if they

were paid what was promised. They had no idea that this vineyard owner had so much extra to give. They had no idea that they could just as well have slept in that morning, gone for a stroll, hung out at the market, and shown up for work close to quitting time, all to receive the very same pay as those who had clocked in at sunrise. They worked more hours, they deserve more pay. Everyone knows this. All they are asking for is basic fairness, elementary justice. Who can argue with that?

Well, God can, apparently. We may not like it, but there is no way around it. Jesus could not be more clear in this parable: If fairness means that we receive precisely what we deserve, then God, my friends, is not fair. If justice means that we are given precisely what we are due, then God, my friends, is not just. That is not to say that God is unfair or unjust. Rather, God is more than fair; God is more than just – God is gracious. God gives and gives and gives some more, with a prodigal abundance far beyond what we could ever possibly deserve. God offers each of us, God offers all of us, what we could never attain for ourselves – divine love, divine life – regardless of our particular merits. That is the nature of grace. Grace is unmerited favor born of divine generosity. It can never be earned, no matter how many hours we spend in the vineyard. It is not measured out in small doses, more here and less there, as if the well might somehow run dry. The well of God’s love overflows from before time and for all time. God’s grace is free, God’s grace is wide, and God’s grace is for everyone. That’s why God’s grace is a scandal.

The 18th century Anglican priest and father of Methodism, John Wesley, on the occasion of being told that he was no longer allowed to preach at a particular church, said, “There are few matters more repugnant to reasonable people than the grace of God.” Why? Because the grace of God is not reasonable. It is an offense to our well-ordered

notions of fairness and justice, reward and punishment, contract and law. God's grace wreaks havoc on our legal system, our educational system, our market system, on every system that is formulated on the basis of a quid pro quo understanding of human achievement. In the kingdom of grace, there is no quid pro quo, no "this for that," but only "this": God's love freely given to all.

But life doesn't work that way, we protest. And, truth be told, we're not sure we want it to. For how can we possibly know where we stand in relation to everyone else? How can we know if we're making the grade, if our lives are in the black? In a culture consumed with competition, grace is a grand offense. But in a kingdom consumed with compassion, grace is God's grand *defense* against the perennial human penchant for keeping score and counting coup. Grace is God's great joke upon humanity. We struggle and strive, we tremble and toil, we work and we worry. We keep score of our life and of other lives, too. We meticulously balance the books. But it's all for naught, a pointless endeavor. For, as priest and writer Robert Farrar Capon puts it, "Bookkeeping is the only punishable offense in the kingdom of heaven. For in that happy state, the *books* are ignored forever, and there is only the *Book* of life. And in that book, nothing stands against you. There are no debit entries that can keep you out of the clutches of the Love that will not let you go. . . . And there is . . . no need for you to show large amounts of black ink, because the only Auditor before whom you must finally stand is the Lamb – and he has gone deaf, dumb, and blind on the cross."

The joke, you see, is that we're already in. We made the grade before we ever cracked a book. We won the game before we ever stepped on the field. The check was made out in our name before we plucked a single grape. And that goes for all of us. Perhaps the most amazing thing about grace is that it's not reserved for the few. It's free

for all to receive. There is no hierarchy in the kingdom of God, no class distinctions, no chain of command. We all share the very same status as children, equal members of the heavenly family. God favors no one, or, perhaps more accurately, God favors everyone. It doesn't matter when we showed up or how long we worked or what we produced, the gift is always the same. All we have to do is reach out and accept it. Amazing grace, indeed.

Scholar and preacher Tom Long tells the story of a young boy many years ago who was a great fan of both Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. The boy faithfully watched both of their television shows, and one day it was announced that Mister Rogers would be paying a visit to the Captain Kangaroo show. The boy was ecstatic. Both of his heroes, together on the same show! Every morning the boy would ask, "Is it today that Mister Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo?" Finally, the great day arrived, and the whole family gathered around the television. There they were, Mister Rogers and Captain Kangaroo together on the screen. The boy watched for a minute, but then, surprisingly, got up and left the room. Puzzled, his father followed him and asked, "What is it son? Is something wrong?" "It's too good," the boy replied. "It's just too good."

One could say the same about grace. To imagine that there is nothing we must do to win God's love and nothing we can do to lose it, that God welcomes all into the kingdom regardless of their status or station in life, of what they have done or will do, that while the last will be first and the first will be last, even those last will have a place at the table – it's almost too much to take in. And that, I think, in the final analysis, is what makes this parable so difficult. It's not that God is unfair, but that God is too good. God is just too good.