Sunday, September 22, 2002
RESENTING GOD'S GRACE
Matthew 20:1-16

Most of you would agree that it's not a good way to structure a pay scale — to give the same daily wage to the person who works one hour and the person who works all day.

How would you develop incentive to increase productivity in a system like that? Most of you would also agree that it's unusual for an employee to complain because he or she received the wage agreed to. And it's rare to meet an employer who defends his right to pay employees more than necessary. All three of these unusual incidents are included in this parable that Jesus told.

It all sounds so irrational and lacking in common sense until you remember the opening sentence of the story. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of Heaven," which is another way of saying, the way God works in the world, the way God loves you unconditionally, the way God's grace operates, "is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard."

The purpose of the story is not to give you advice on how to run your enterprise but to tell you how God runs God's business, how the Holy One dispenses grace and love. That, however, does not decrease the "shock value" of the story.

The story is telling us that the ways in which God works are often upside-down. Isaiah the prophet said: "For my ways are not your ways, says the Lord, nor my thoughts your thoughts." The way the world works and the way God works are frequently two very different things. The shocking fact also is that if you are a "follower of the way," you are called upon to live differently. Didn't Jesus say? "Love your enemies, give away your coat if someone asks for it, don't be anxious about tomorrow, don't count how many times you forgive, don't be afraid to eat with people who have no reputation, don't worry if your coat or jeans or dress or suit doesn't have the preferred label on it, visit those in prison." Do any of these sound like the way to live for those who want to get ahead? Is that the kind of advice you might get from the many self-help books? Is that how to be number one?

In the story right before this one in Matthew's gospel, Jesus had an encounter with a very rich young man who had everything he needed in this world, but he was still worried and knew that he was missing something in his life. He was anxious about what would happen to him and all his wealth after he died. So, he asked Jesus, "What do I need to do to find meaning in this life and the next?" The man wondered if following all the commandments was enough because he had been doing that and still felt there was something lacking in his life.

Then Jesus gave him the answer that he didn't want to hear, and which you and I don't want to hear: "Sell all your possessions. Give the money to the poor and come and follow me." This, however, was too much for the young man. He couldn't do it, and he went away grieving, "for he had many possessions."

Here's a little detour on this story. In another place in the New Testament, a man comes to Jesus with the same question, "What must I do to find eternal life?" Jesus gave this man a different answer. He told him that he needed to be "born again." This man, named Nicodemus,

at first did not understand that Jesus was calling for a spiritual rebirth, a new way of looking at the world and living in it.

In yet another story, a lawyer asked Jesus the same question. Jesus answered him by asking a question: “What does the law tell you?” The lawyer replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus told him, “You have answered correctly.” Then the lawyer asked the follow-up question, “Who is my neighbor?” And Jesus told him the story of the good Samaritan and told the lawyer to follow that example. Same question! Three different answers!

In two of these three examples, there’s nothing said about being “born again.” It’s a bit puzzling because there are those who want to build their whole case for becoming a Christian on the statement about being born again, and some even go on to say that unless you have a very specific and identifiable “born again” experience, you cannot enter God’s Kingdom.

You could just as logically choose one of the other two incidents and say, for example, that unless you as an individual sell all that you own and give the money away, you cannot enter God’s realm. Then you would not be a “born again” Christian, but a “sell all you have and give to the poor” Christian. There aren’t too many of those around.

What we forget is that in each case, Jesus gave a specific answer to a specific person. He tailored his answer according to what was the barrier in that person’s life. You can use your imagination and maybe, in another person’s case, Jesus might say, “You have to quit your job and get a different one because your present job is ruining your life and has become a block between you and God and your family.” Or, “You have to give up your total obsession with sports.”

Any obsession can become your god. That’s what Jesus was saying to the wealthy young man. He wasn’t condemning wealth per se. He was talking about being open to receiving God’s grace. You enter God’s realm because of God’s unconditional love and acceptance. And sometimes, to you and me, it seems that God accepts people and bestows grace on individuals that we would not accept — people we do not think of as being as deserving as we are of God’s grace; or at least they should not get as much of God’s grace as we do. To put it plainly, sometimes we resent God’s grace toward some people.

That’s the theme of this parable. God’s way of dispensing grace, which includes forgiveness and unconditional love, is like this landowner, who goes to the labor hiring hall early in the morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. The place is filled with people hoping for work so they can feed their families. He hires what he thinks are going to be enough workers and agrees to pay them a fair wage for the day, and they agree to it. About every three hours as the day progresses, the landowner realizes he is going to need more workers, so he returns to the hiring hall and employs more. I am convinced he also returns to the labor market to see if there are people who are still unemployed.

Notice, he doesn’t wait for the workers to come to him; he goes back to the hiring hall. He takes the initiative. Each time he finds workers who haven’t yet been employed for that day. It’s not because they are lazy and are waiting for a handout. He even questions them, “Why are you still idle?” And they answer, “Because no one has hired us.” Even when there’s only one hour left in the day, he returns to the hiring hall and finds workers who haven’t been offered work. So, he tells them, “You go to the vineyard too.”

Then, at six o'clock, it's payroll time. Instead of paying the workers who had worked all day first, the owner does the opposite. He calls forward to receive their money the laborers who had only worked one hour and pays them a full day's wage — openly, so that everyone can see what's happening. Next, he pays those who have worked only three hours, then those who have worked six hours, followed by those who have worked nine hours, and lastly, he pays those who have worked all day — twelve hours. This adds to the shock value of the story. Why didn't he pay them secretly, so that no one would know what everyone received? Why didn't he pay the all-day workers first?

What happened is what you would expect. Those who had worked all day complained loudly, even though the owner had kept his contract with them. He paid them what they had agreed on when they went to work. The covenant is kept. The demands of the law are met.

The owner, hearing their complaints, said, "Why do you resent my generosity to those who have not worked as long as you? Why do you resent their good fortune?" The same kind of resentment is displayed by the older brother in the story of the prodigal son. He said to his father, "It isn't fair that my younger brother should receive such a joyful welcome from you. I have stayed home all these years and worked hard. No one ever gave me a party." The story of Jonah in the Old Testament has the same theme. Jonah didn't want to preach to the people of Nineveh. He was certain they didn't deserve God's grace. Even at God's call, he preached reluctantly. He was angry and resentful at his own success. The people repented and accepted God's grace. Jonah wanted those wicked, unbelieving Ninevites to be punished by God. He was afraid that a kind-hearted God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, would forgive them if given half a chance.

All these stories cause me to wonder: Why does it bother us? Why are we so resentful when someone else is treated generously, when at the same time we already have enough and have also been treated fairly? Why is it so difficult for us to rejoice at another's good fortune? This is a theme that runs through the teachings of Jesus — a judgment on us who are so resentful not at deprivation but at generosity shown to another. We are resentful of God's grace to those we think don't deserve it. We don't always say it, but we think it: "God, you're being very unfair."

It's not so very different from Martha's reaction when Jesus affirms her sister Mary for sitting at his feet while Martha does all the meal preparation. "Tell my sister to get up and help me. You're playing favorites."

It's the cry of the Pharisee, the cry of good people through the ages: Why are other people the recipients of God's grace when they don't deserve it; when they haven't done half of what I've done? Have you ever found yourself resenting someone else's advancement? Have you ever known yourself to be content with your title and salary, until you hear of someone else getting an equal or better one?

Could it be that a part of the cause of our resentment springs from a feeling of insecurity about our own worth as human beings? If you felt truly good about yourself, would you always be comparing yourself to others?

I believe there's also a deep-seated fear in us that there is not enough to go around; that if someone else receives more, we will receive less. If like me, you grew up in a family of more than one child, you probably thought, as I did, that your parents had a favorite child at times and that you were not it. It was based on the assumption that your parents only had so much love to spread around, and if another sibling seemed to get more than you, there would not be

enough to go around and you would of necessity be getting less. However, the message of God's love is that there is an abundance of it. There is always more than enough to go around. The same is true of human love — the more you love others, the more love you have to give, and the more you are open to receiving.

Another danger of resenting God's grace is that anyone who looks at God's blessings with one eye and, with the other, tries to keep track of whether others are receiving a little bit more, soon becomes incapable of recognizing any blessings in this life at all. We become scorekeepers rather than those who know that we are also infinitely loved by God.

This is a story, then, to warn us against being resentful of God's grace to those we think don't deserve it. You and I gain absolutely nothing from being resentful. It only makes us bitter and unhappy.

It's a story that reminds us that God loves us equally in spite of life's unfairness. It's a story that tells us that we do not earn God's love — it is always given unconditionally. It's a story that rejects "reward religion." It rejects the heresy that God loves some people more than others because they are more religious than the rest of us or because they have earned God's love in some other way. It also rejects the opposite heresy that God loves you and me more than some other people because we believe our brand of religion is superior, or that God loves us more because we are more inclusive. It's a story that tells us that all of us will always get more of God's grace than we deserve. Now that's good news. Amen.