

Strange Policies, Unusual Practices
Matthew 20:21-16
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
September 24, 2017
Rev. Glen Bell

How do we see ourselves? How do we think about ourselves?

Several years ago one of my friends went to Brazil with a Presbyterian ministry. They visited the New Life Presbyterian Church in Sao Paulo. The church provides a program there for about five dozen children from a nearby slum.

The leaders of this program were eight high school students, members of the church. They dedicated every Saturday morning to working with these children. The Americans were invited forward to tell stories and offer testimonies. Then they all sang together, those from the United States, the youth working so unselfishly, and the children, who had so little of the world's riches.

One of the group paraphrased a song they all sang together. "It doesn't matter what you have or who you are, you are precious in the sight of God. God holds you in his heart. You are precious in the sight of God."

This is grace, grace upon grace, God's free gift of love poured out for all of us. God cherishes us, no matter who or what we are. God runs to welcome us home, even if we are lost and have wandered far.

Today's parable is grace, rooted in God's goodness and mercy. But it is also strange and unusual, with this news of grace and our personal ideas of justice rubbing up against each other.

First, there is grace. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hires a series of laborers. Some he hires early in the morning, others a bit later, others even later. Surprisingly, the landowner even hires a final group when the work day is coming to a close.

Then at the end of the day, he pays each and every one of them a fair wage for that day's work. As the scripture relates, he pays each of them – each of them! - the usual daily wage, no matter what time they entered the fields.

What kindness! What a blessing! To reward those who worked only half the day *or even half an hour* with a full day's wage. To give each of these laborers meaningful work and a way to provide for themselves and their families. To demonstrate that he the landowner is beyond fair, that he is gracious and kind, abounding in love.

But at the very same moment, there seems something wrong with this story, something that bugs us, something that rubs us raw. Even though he agreed with each laborer for the usual daily wage, *it just doesn't seem fair* to pay all of them the same amount of money.

Think about it. At your shop, your business, your school, your home, if you hired someone to work all day and promised him \$ 250, and then hired another person mid-day and promised them \$ 250, and both worked hard and well, wouldn't you find a way to give the all-day worker a little extra? Wouldn't you think they had earned it?

That's the hook. That's the problem. That's where you and I get into trouble, when you and I think about what we have earned.

This is a way of thinking about our lives. Many of our neighbors think this way every single day. I have worked hard, they believe. I have earned respect and appreciation. I deserve a reward! I deserve a break!

Ron Byars taught at Union Seminary, and he puts it this way. “Our culture challenges faith every day, sometimes directly. . . . Most follow the lead of the dominant culture either all the time or some of the time. Faith unsupported can easily fade, and we end up running on fumes. No one is exempt from this relentless challenge.”

You and I gather to resist this challenge. You and I gather to remember who we are and Whose we are. We worship to hear this reminder that life is not about me – or what we think we have earned, but what God gives.

It is easy to lose our way. I worked for fifteen years as a Sunday school teacher at my church back in Illinois, we may think. That’s only one step away from concluding. I’m not going to teach church school any longer. Or I made all kinds of generous gifts to my home congregation in Pennsylvania. That leads us right into “Now’s the time to rest and relax, to hold onto my money and my stuff.” Or: I have served as an elder or deacon here at First Presbyterian Church two or three times already. I can step back now and hope somebody else steps forward.

This is a deadly temptation for me and those of us who stand in pulpits also. When we hear this story through the filter of our own personal wants and desires, we lose our way. It becomes all about me. I forget my faults and failings, that I am sometimes abrupt, intense and impatient. I focus on me. I want the God-given reward I think I am due. God help me, sometimes I think *my* reward should be greater than the reward of others.

This is a spiritual problem.

That’s one reason why we Presbyterians often have a prayer of confession in worship. The first movement of worship is always praise and adoration. So we sing our opening hymn or song, caught up in praise. In awe and wonder, we praise God for all the Lord is and does.

But the next move is often confessing our sins. Confessing *my* faults, not the mistakes and failings of those who have offended me. My most common personal silent prayer of confession at 8:15 and 11:00 is this: God, help me stop thinking that *it’s all about me*, how *I* feel, what *I* think, how others are treating *me*.

Two important dynamics in this parable lead us home – and teach us how to live.

First, on every occasion that he hires more laborers, the landowner says, “You go out into the fields, and I will pay you whatever is right.” It’s easy to miss; did you catch it? I will pay you whatever is right. This story is an invitation to trust in the Lord, to trust that God is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. God will give us all that we need.

We may have never lost power; we may have just gotten it back a couple of days ago. We may have very little damage at our house; we may have lost a fence or some trees or part of our roof. We may be important in the community; no one may know our name. We may have been working faithfully and well in God’s vineyard all day long; we may have only made it out there for the last thirty minutes of the workday. No matter. God will give us what we need. God will grant us grace and peace. God will give us a sense of self rooted in divine love.

That’s not all God gives. The second dynamic is almost as important as the first. God gives us good work to do. At every turn in this story, the landowner wonders why workers are

standing idle. Not just our grandmother but also almighty God believes it: “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.”

Whether you or I have lived here for all eighty-some years of our lives, or whether we haven’t been here yet for eighteen months, it is easy for us to lose our way and think only about what we have earned. If we’ve been here all our lives, it’s easy to think, “I’ve worked hard. This is an incredibly beautiful place. It’s time for me to head to the beach!” Or if we have just arrived in the last five or ten years, it’s easy to think. “Sarasota is a place to relax!”

But God has good work for us to do – giving, forgiving, praying, teaching, serving, leading, blessing. There are children who need teaching, youth who need advisors, homeless who need our assistance, farmworkers who need decent housing.

How do we see ourselves? How do we think of ourselves?

Kathryn Blanchard teaches at Alma College. She sums it all up this way. “[We] workers must recognize the opportunity to work as a gift in itself. There is no room for human pride . . . or to stand idle and waste one’s life. . . .All are equally deserving or undeserving. . . . There is radical equality before God.”

She also reminds us of the reflections of John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism. “Those [of us] who serve God only because [we] wish to avoid punishment or obtain payment do so in the manner of a servant. Those [of us] who work in God’s vineyard as a gift do so without coercion, as [God’s children] who love and wish to please [the Lord].”

Maybe the song of those destitute Brazilian children has the answer this morning. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you have. You are precious in the sight of God. God holds you in his heart.

So in our giving and forgiving, in our praying and serving, in our teaching and leading and blessing, let remember who we are. Let us live and love from gratitude and praise, rooted in the amazing grace of God.