

## ***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

### **True Grace: Trusting the Character of God**

Matthew 20:1-16

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Isaiah 65:1, John 10:16

There was once a man named Frank. Frank hadn't been to church in years, but he was the neighbor of a pastor and his kids participated in the youth group at his neighbor's church. His neighbor, the pastor, officiated at his daughter's wedding and sat with Frank's wife when she almost died. Many times over the years, Frank was invited by his neighbor, the Pastor to church. He would always laugh and say, "Pastor, the ceiling would fall in if I came to church."

One day, to the Pastor's surprise, Frank hesitantly walked into the sanctuary and took a seat near the back. He wore blue jeans and the cleanest flannel shirt he owned. He fumbled his way through the service, find hymns just as they finished and listening intently to the sermon nodding.

After worship Frank wandered down the aisle and shook the Pastor, his neighbor's hand, and said, "Pastor, aren't you surprised the ceiling didn't fall in?"

The both looked up. The pastor said, "It didn't fall in, but I do notice few cracks." They both laughed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gulley, P., & Mulholland, J. (2004). *If grace is true: Why God will save every person*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco. Adapted from a story on page 68.

I too have had this experience with folks, at weddings when a long lost relative walks in and looks up, and mimics dodging lightning. When someone who comes to plan a loved ones service jokingly leans on the door frame, pretending to hold it up because the building might collapse if they ever showed up.

Of course we all nervously laugh, but this really isn't that funny. So many people enter churches with an understanding they are avoiding God's ambush. How does the joke go? When Pastor's fly we never admit we are clergy, we instead say we sell "fire insurance." Somehow we as Christians at time have allowed our faith to boiled down to an understanding that God is lying in wait, ready to take vengeance out on those who have wandered too far from living in faith.

One of the deepest calls from God on the Christian church in this era, is to step into the teachings of Jesus with a new passion and depth. To tell Jesus' parables and to remind people of the character of God that Jesus brought to life through his life, death and resurrection.

So for the next 4 weeks we are going to do just that, and we are starting simple. We are going to look at one story Jesus told and come back to it over these 4 weeks. The parable of the field workers, located in Matthew 20 is a story rooted in telling the character of our God, the God Jesus was pointing us to.

Before I go further though, I want to reiterate the challenges with knowing the character of God. In our own Bible there are different understandings of who God is. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, God is described as a character in much of the writings. The very character is portrayed different ways. If you study scripture much you will learn that in the first book of the Bible there are even two understandings of God the Jahwist understanding and the Elohist. Jahwist is similar to what Jesus would often point to, a character of God

willing to engage humans in relationship. The Elohist tends to represent the heavenly court of God, judging and reflecting on mortal existence. Additionally, I want to note that while God plays as a character throughout the Old Testament, God is not a character with a direct part if you read your New Testament closely. Instead, in the New Testament, Jesus and the writers of letters and books refer to God through story and metaphor. God is no less active in their minds, just not a character acting out part of the story.

I share this basic understanding of God's character being less than simple, to remind us that we as Christians and people of the Bible have a responsibility to understand our God, and share our understanding to help the world understand who God can be for them.

The same neighbor, Pastor, I talked of before knew a woman who was fanatically clean. Her home was spotless. She donned white gloves and moves from room to room, checking for dust. The furniture in her house is covered in plastic.

The pastor went to visit her once. She invited him into her front room, apologizing for how filthy the house was. The pastor sat down on the couch's cold plastic and chatted. She offered some iced tea to the pastor and place my glass on a coaster on the coffee table. After a sip, the pastor inadvertently placed the glass on the wood of the coffee table. She glared at the glass, suddenly oblivious to everything else, until the pastor realized his mistake.

When the pastor left, he suspected she washed down the couch with disinfectant, sprayed air freshener through the room, and polished the coffee table. She was obsessed.<sup>2</sup>

At points I have thought and I know others in the churches I have served have thought that faith was about moral purity. In turn those in our communities started to believe if they were morally impure they did not belong in church. Holiness of God is a strange thing, many of us assume holiness means next to Godliness or perfection. Yet, the Jesus we follow used mud and spit to heal blindness, hung around prostitutes the greedy, and the outcasts, and called disciples who were all rejected by other Rabbis of the day. We believe God came down in Jesus, and that means God knows how to get dirty and into the moral messiness of finding our way.

I got the opportunity to watch some of those old western movies growing up. One of my favorites was *Shane* starring Alan Ladd. If you don't know it, it is a story about a gunfighter who takes a job as a farm hand, only to have the evil rancher, Ryker, abuse the townsfolk. By the end of the movie, you just need Shane to act on his old instincts and finally, reluctantly, he does. He straps on his pistol and blasts the bad guys. You feel as though Shane's triumph becomes your own.

I remember the same feeling every time I hear the scripture where Jesus walks into the temple and flips every last table over of those greedy people selling sacrifices at too high a price. Jesus gets fed up with people getting in the way of God, for the average people and says enough is enough. Every time I hear this story I feel a little justified about what is happening.

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<sup>2</sup> Gulley, P., & Mulholland, J. (2004). *If grace is true: Why God will save every person*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco. Adapted from a story on page 69

Then something happens though, and I wonder if I could go flip tables. They crucify Jesus. Yet, like Shane we trust the archetype to play out. Like Neo in the matrix or Luke Skywalker in star wars we know the hero will make a comeback. That's why Easter morning is so satisfying, Jesus wins the day.<sup>3</sup>

However, what does Jesus do when he comes back. He does not destroy those who destroyed him. He does not blast the temple courts clear of those standing in the way. He breaks bread and sends his disciples to love the world. Wait what?

Jesus is flipping the tables of people who I don't like, but he also flips my own tables. Jesus loves all people, not just the churchgoers (Check out the Isaiah passage and John passage in your bulletin when you get home). Jesus holiness means messy engagement makes us pure, not painstakingly making the house perfect for Jesus' arrival. Jesus' understands God's justice is something brought through bread breaking with strangers, not through hard fought victory over our enemies. The God Jesus describes to us has a character not wrapped up in words like "victory" and "winning." Instead he wraps God's character in messy words like "love" and "grace."

Then we come to our scripture for today, a story we will here again and again this month. To remind us of God's character.

Matthew 20:1-16 Common English Bible (CEB)

**20** "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard.

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<sup>3</sup> Gulley, P., & Mulholland, J. (2004). *If grace is true: Why God will save every person*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco. Adapted from passages in the book, I enjoy Shane much like the author did. So while my thoughts reflect his in the book, I also have similar sentiments. I borrowed generously and with no intent to copy. The words just wrang so true.

<sup>3</sup>“Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup>He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ <sup>5</sup>And they went.

“Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. <sup>6</sup>Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’

<sup>7</sup>“‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied.

“He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

<sup>8</sup>“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’<sup>9</sup>When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion.<sup>10</sup>Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. <sup>11</sup>When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,<sup>12</sup> ‘These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’

<sup>13</sup>“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ <sup>16</sup> So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”

I feel uncomfortable when I read this passage. We should feel uncomfortable. The one who only works for one hour, it doesn't feel fair they get paid the same. Fairness, feels unjust to those who worked harder. I feel annoyed by this passage, and I feel concerned about why I should work so hard to do what is right when it will result in the same thing.

Growing up we had a woman who helped lead our youth ministry. Her name was Jannie. Jannie was like the mother for our youth group. She had no children of her own, but she didn’t need any. She created safe

space for us as teenagers to talk with each other through problems. She never had an agenda, but Jannie always had something for us. We could always count on Jannie to cry.

Jannie would cry tears of joy for us, and tears of pain. She could conjure tears for disappointment, and tears for jubilation.

So when Jannie got cancer, it was like a surrogate parent getting cancer. When cancer took Jannie, it was unfair to us all. Yet, even in her dying she told us she did not hate the cancer, she had to love it. She just said, "The cancer is just cells who have gone astray, I don't hate them for what they do. I hurt for what they do. I can not help, but love."

Jannie was saint for us as youth and her tears for everything, reminded us that love was enough to provide in any situation. That through her emotions we could have emotions, and in her death we cried enough to learn that loving was worthwhile.

Jannie is my saint because she points back to something I have often missed in our scripture for today.

The landowner, in every case God, provides one denarius for each worker. In the language of Jesus day, "1 denarius equals enough to live on for one day."

Ephesians 3:17-19 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>17</sup>I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, <sup>18</sup>I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. <sup>19</sup>I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God.

Jannie was filled with the fullness of God, I am convinced that is why she cried so much. I am convinced God cries a lot, especially our God.

Because God knows that we will get enough each day to live, if we can just trust in God's love, if we can trust God's character is enough love for each of us, each day.

So this is grace friends, it is not pretty, or perfect, but it is the Good News that Jesus called us to share. Grace is the gospel message we are called to share, and that our saints call us to share. Grace is the knowledge that God's love will provide enough for everyone no matter what, every day.