

“Unanticipated grace”

September 28, 2008,

Text: Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20:1-16

I.

As many of you know, my father died a week ago Friday, on September 19th, one day shy of his 91st birthday. Yvette and I just returned from the Midwest where we had a Memorial Service in celebration and remembrance of my dad’s wonderful life. He was really a special person.

In thinking back on my father’s life and on our lives growing up in Aurora, Illinois, I’m aware that, although we didn’t know it at the time, we struggled financially. Eventually my dad found his way as a successful salesman and things began to look up.

But I remember how my dad was always on the side of the little guy ... people and groups of people who were often left out ... the invisible ones ... invisible because of race or relative poverty or whatever.

It was those early experiences, particularly of seeing the uneven playing field with regard to race or ethnicity that led me—years later—to enter the U.S. Peace Corps ... and to work for the Office of Economic Opportunity ... and, then, to go on to Seminary.

My hill to die on in the church is I can’t stand injustice ... or anybody being left out and going to bed at night feeling unseen, unheard, unvalued ... invisible to the world.

II.

In our parable for this morning of the **Workers in the Vineyard**, since early in the morning, the landowner has been going out to hire workers for his vineyard; at last, only one group remains.

It’s around five o’clock, now, and the work day is almost over. Nonetheless, one more time, the landowner goes to the market place and when he sees the workers who are still there, he asks them a tough question:

Why are you standing here idle all day?

Their answer is a simple one: *Because no one has hired us*, they reply.

We’re not told why this is the case. Were they somehow unqualified, lacking the necessary skills? Was there a language problem? Did they lack the appropriate documentation? Did they seem too old or too young? Why weren’t they hired?

Then again, maybe they hadn't been able to get there earlier in the day. With gas prices the way they've been lately, maybe they couldn't afford the transportation and they had to walk; or perhaps they had to stay at home with a sick child.

Still, whatever their reasons, they were hired and sent off to work in the vineyard. However, soon, the work day was over and it was time to pay the workers. And then the surprises began.

The first surprise was that the landowner instructed his manager to pay each worker—no matter what his starting time—the usual daily wage. Imagine that!

Certainly, the workers who had barely begun to break a sweat had to be delightfully surprised. They'd only just begun working ... and now they're receiving a full day's pay.

Upon seeing what these *late workers* were paid, understandably, the other workers—particularly those who had labored through the long, hot part of the day, just assumed they would be paid more. However, they, too, were paid what had been agreed to at the outset—the usual daily wage.

In other words, whether you had just begun laboring in the vineyard or had been exhausted by the long day's labor, you received the same pay.

When the apparent injustice of this settled in, the early workers began to grumble. But when they confronted the landowner about what seemed to them the obvious unfairness of it all, the landowner answered them,

*Hey, can't I do what I want with what belong to me?
I paid you what I said I would pay you, a full day's wage.*

III.

Our immediate reaction might well be to support these early workers. What kind of a world is it where everybody gets the same pay, no matter how hard they've worked, no matter how long they've labored in the vineyard? Certainly, it's not fair.

What's the point of working the long hours if the late workers are going to receive the same reward as the early workers? They might just as well have slept in, worked around the house all morning and wandered in when the mood struck them.

There's no reason or logic to this sort of arrangement. In the competition and work ethic of the business world, this landowner would go out of business in no time.

Fair enough! We can all agree on this.

But of course, this is a parable of Jesus and the larger message is something totally different all together. Anytime we're dealing with the grace of God and the upside down world of Jesus, we have to ready ourselves to be surprised ...

As it turns out, the parable is *not* about the profit motive and a fair reward for production rendered. It's not about the economics of the market place.

It's about something totally different: the economics of God's grace. And in that economy, the abundance of God's grace is unending and it never runs out. And of course the beauty of this grace is that it's unconditional and it applies equally to everybody.

IV.

As the sun sets on the work day, what happens in the vineyard is a profound experience of the blessing of God's grace—in all its abundance and beauty and love. And friends, that's a transforming experience.

What the parable teaches is that, in the economy of God, everybody is in ... everybody is welcome ... no one is left out. Every human being is valued, appreciated and celebrated.

What sets this *abundance of God's grace* apart, once again, is the unconditional acceptance. Grace is not some measure of achievement, moral, ethical, material, spiritual—whatever it is. It's about acceptance of us as we are, right now. ***Unanticipated grace.***

Grace says, ***You're hired!*** No questions asked. *You're hired! You matter ... you're special ... God loves you, understands you, forgives you, welcomes you ... has a place for you at God's table ... and on and on ...*

That's not always our experience in life, is it? We all remember, growing up, choosing up sides for one kind of game or another. Often times, the same people get picked last all the time ... or not picked at all.

Or, remember the dances in the gymnasium with the girls on one side and the boys on the other. And then, suddenly, it's ***girl's choice***, or ***boy's choice*** ... and you go across to the other side, or they come to your side, and you choose.

Not everybody gets chosen. And sometimes, feelings get hurt.

V.

I remember applying for different minister positions in the church over the years. There were three times when it came down to me and one other candidate and I didn't get chosen. Now, as it turned out, each time, I was actually better off NOT getting chosen,

but at the moment, you don't feel that way.

One time, in particular, I was seeking my first call in a *United Church of Christ* church—back in 1982. At the time, we were living in Buffalo, N.Y. Long story ... in any event, we were trying to relocate back to California and I had gone out to California to interview with the Southern California Conference and with any churches where I might be a good fit as their new pastor.

While out there, I had interviews with the Pastoral Search Committees of three different churches. One, in particular, seemed very interested in me and seemed like a good fit as well. They worked it out for me to preach the next Sunday at a neutral church, which went super ... and as I was flying back to Buffalo, I was really confident they were going to extend me the call.

But it wasn't to be. They selected the other guy. And I can remember feeling absolutely crestfallen. We wanted so much to get back to California ... and this would have been an excellent way to get back and to get untracked in the UCC.

VI.

Well, in the economy of God's grace, everybody gets chosen. No one gets that rejection letter or rejection phone call (it's usually a letter).

Those workers in the vineyard that day—whether they arrived early or late—they all had stuff they were dealing with in their personal lives.

- Jobs they had lost ... relationships that had run sour ... bad decisions they had made along the way.
- Surely, some of them were burdened with guilt, others with low self-esteem, others, still, with a bad reputation they had acquired over the years ...

Sadly, those who labored longest in the vineyard that day and were, no doubt, the most upset at pay time; they missed the blessing of the vineyard. They missed the hug of God's blessing and God's unconditional acceptance of them in the midst of whatever they were working through in life.

One of the things we learn here is that *grace* is a larger experience than justice.

There's a second surprise in this parable; and that's the surprise that apparently God has a preferential option for those whom no one else wants; in the case of the parable, for the last workers hired.

To avoid any confusion here, this doesn't mean God loves these late workers more than the early workers. It just means God definitely doesn't love them any less ... and

that, to make sure everybody *gets it*, they get to go to the head of the line.

So the last will be first, and the first will be last, concludes Jesus. ***Unanticipated grace.***

VII.

You see, friends, at the end of the day, it's not about what we think other people deserve, bad a worse than bad. I'm sure we all have our list. But Jesus comes along and tears up our lists.

Ouch! That's what upset Jonah so much. Jonah had a list and the city of Nineveh, whose sins were legion in Jonah's day, was at the top. And at last, Jonah had come at God's bidding and had issued God's warning to the city.

But, lo and behold—to the surprise of everyone—the city repented ... and God changed God's mind. And Jonah couldn't handle it. God's grace was too much, God's mercy too great. And Jonah went off and pouted.

What Jonah needed was to join the early workers for the blessing in the vineyard that day, and let the sun set on his resentment and anger.

Friends, the BIG PICTURE of this parable is that *we're all in this life together*. And by the magnificent grace of God, we're all hired. We're all invited. None of us is left out.

More still, just at the point when we think we're going to be rejected, when we think we're not going to make it, when we think we're going to be left out in the cold.

Just when we think we're too old ... or too ordinary ... or too much of a burden in any way—whatever it is—the Spirit comes, through God's **unanticipated grace**, and takes us to the front of the line. And, once again, we're reassured and our hearts are warmed and we know that nothing can separate us from God's love.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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