

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

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Worship Theme-Disturbing Grace,

Exodus 16: 2-15, Matthew 20: 1-16

If there are two things we Americans say we want, they are equality and fairness— particularly for ourselves as individuals. However, in our Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, we say that we are a republic that stands for “liberty and justice for all.” We also like equality and fairness in Wyoming where the State motto is “Equal Rights.” Our nickname is “The Equality State.” In great part, the motto and nickname come from the fact that Wyoming was the first U.S. territory to grant women the right to vote in 1869 and the first state to do the same in 1890. We are supposed to be a state and country where “Everyone should be treated fairly and equally.” We are still working on making this a reality as a state and nation.

Even though we human beings still need to improve on treating each other equally and fairly, one would think God, the head of all that is, would have this process perfected. But, after hearing the Gospel lesson and the disturbing grace it describes, we might wonder if God treats everyone equally and fairly? Let us contemplate this question as we explore together the “Disturbing Grace” of God.

**So what is God’s disturbing grace?** Think of it as God’s unconditional love being shown or shared with people we might not think deserve it, or in a way with which we do not agree—and it disturbs our understanding of God and how God works. The lesson from Exodus illustrates this. God had delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, and was leading them through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. The people complained mightily about the conditions and showed a terrible lack of trust in God. Despite the complaints and lack of faith, God gave them more manna and quail than they could eat in a day. God’s grace came through to save them. It was a disturbing grace because by all standards of human fairness these people of little faith deserved to be punished or abandoned by God, and not have had their needs met.

We find this same violation of human standards of fairness, and illustration of God’s disturbing grace in abundance in the reading from Matthew. Here we have workers being paid the same amount of money for a days’ labor **no matter how many hours they worked**. At first this may not seem to be grace at all, but an unfair labor practice on the part of the vineyard owner. Presbyterian preacher, Thomas Long, the most often quoted resource for this sermon writes, “This parable is not a lesson in corporate economics or an example of how employers, even Christian ones are to treat their employees. Any company that paid employees hired in December the same wage as those who worked a full twelve months would soon have trouble finding anybody in the office from January to November. Any teacher who gave an “A” to a student who registered for the course on the last day of class would face a justifiable revolt on the part of the students who showed up for class and handed in the required assignments.

“The purpose of this parable is not to provide a practical guide for the management of a vineyard, a factory, or a classroom. **Indeed, the aim of this parable is to force us to think new thoughts—new thoughts about ourselves, about other people, about God and how God works.**” It is about disturbing grace.

Please follow me carefully as we discover more about this disturbing grace. “Let’s consider the landowner in the parable as a symbol for God. This is not the same as saying that the landowner is God; but the way the landowner operates in the parable **gives us ‘insights to the character of God’” and his disturbing grace.**

“Notice, for instance, that the focus of the landowner’s concern is always on the laborers, not on the crop or on his own profit. **Ordinarily**, one would expect the story to say that the landowner hired some harvesters early in the day, but, when he found out there was more crop than these first workers could handle, he went out to secure extra help. **But no**, the story says that the owner hired more workers **because** he found them standing around, out of work. **In other words, the landowner is motivated by their need for work, not his need for workers.** Particularly touching is the exchange with the five o’clock crew. When the landowner found them still loitering in the market near the end of the day, he asked them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ‘Because no one needs us,’ they responded. A normal employer would say, ‘Well that’s tough’ or perhaps more compassionately, ‘I wish I could use you, but we’re full at the moment. It’s the economy, you understand. Maybe it will pick up soon.’” Unfortunately, I suspect this is heard by thousands of workers in our country today. “But this is **no normal** employer. This divine landowner employs even those the world ignores and forgets. As he surveys these idle folk who stand there like the leftover kids on a ball field whom nobody wants on the team, he calls out graciously, ‘I can use you. You also go into the vineyard.’”

“Because the landowner is a symbol for God, the parable also encourages us to place **ourselves in the shoes of the laborers and to rethink how we relate to God.** Notice how the various groups of workers operate out of quite different agreements with the landowner. The early morning group made a firm and clear contract for a regular day’s wage. Before they would go into the vineyard, they wrangled a bargain for a denarius. The nine o’clock, noon, and three o’clock shifts, however, were less specific, and perhaps a bit more trusting. They went into the vineyard only on the landowner’s word that he would pay them ‘whatever is right.’ The five o’clock workers **struck no deal whatsoever**; all it took to get them into the vineyard was the simple invitation of the landowner, ‘You also go.’”

“**At the end of the day, the landowner gives all the workers what they need” in a way that is disturbing grace.** “Everybody gets a full day’s wage; everybody gets a denarius; everybody gets enough to provide for life. When the all-day laborers grumble about the pay scale, carping that the one-hour crowd has been made their equals, the landowner merely reminds one of them that he got what he bargained for: ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’” **Ah, yes, more disturbing grace.**

“The parable dramatically contrasts” those employed in the last hour with the first-hour workers. “The last-hour crew were; those who have waited in vain

throughout the day for a call; those who were desperate and needy and who knew it; those who realized that they would stand idle and useless all day were it not for the benevolence of the landowner; and those who in relief and joy and trust responded to the command of the landowner to go labor. All these were given sheer grace: a day's wage. The first-hour workers, even though they don't recognize it, were also given grace: a day's wage, the sustenance of life."

"But grace is **not** the framework of the first hour workers. We have already seen that they are bargainers, contract workers. They think that life works according to deals and negotiations; they even strike bargains with the Almighty. They count up good deeds, check their time cards, and divvy out their devotion with measuring spoons. Their vocabulary is filled with cries of 'I deserve' and 'where's mine?' and 'it is my God-given right.'" God's grace is very disturbing to them. "The contrast could not be greater. The bargainers are working for a denarius; the latecomers are working for the landowner, for God. **Both get what they are working for.**"

"In the ordinary sense, all the workers get a denarius, a typical daily wage for laborers. But this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, and we are compelled to think beyond the ordinary sense. What is a 'daily wage' in the kingdom of heaven?" This question is answered by Jesus in previous teachings where Peter asks Jesus about the "wages" of followers of Jesus, "What then will we have?" Jesus' answer? "A hundredfold, and eternal life." "In other words, at the end of the day all who have labored in God's vineyard, all who have served in the work of the kingdom, will be lavished with the 'daily wage' of heaven: all the treasure" and disturbing grace of God.

"Suddenly, we see the true poverty of the first-hour workers. Everybody in the parable is generously given the wealth of the kingdom; the deep river of providence flows through everybody's life—God gives everyone a daily wage so extravagant that no one could ever spend it all"—just as God gave the Hebrews more food than they could eat in a day. "A deluge of disturbing grace, joy and blessing descends on all. And there these first-hour workers stand, drenched in God's mercy, an ocean of peace running down their faces, clutching their little contracts and whining that they deserve more rain."

"In the landowner's speech at the end of the parable, he declares that he is free to do what he will with what he owns, and he uses this freedom to be generous. The same is true of God. 'The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,' and, despite our schemes of religious merit and competition, God chooses to be generous. To the leper, to the lame, to the Gentile, to the last and the least God is merciful. Now, the questions are, 'What do we think of the way God uses the divine freedom? What do we think of this kind of gracious God? What do we really think about a God whose basic character is mercy and forgiveness?' **When it is shown toward us**, of course, we like it fine, **but the test comes when God shows mercy and disturbing grace to people we do not think deserve it.** When we look in our pay envelopes and find that we received the same measure of mercy as those who, in our opinion, have arrived too late, with too little, then our response is a test of kingdom character."

The question raised at the end of the parable by the landowner "are you envious because I am generous?" can be more literally translated "is your eye evil because I

am good?” This “evil eye” language takes us back to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus described the eye as a symbol for the spirit of the whole person. In other words, when the landowner says to the first-hour workers, ‘Are you envious because I am generous?’ he is really saying, ‘Does my generosity expose the poverty of your own spirit?’ In Jesus, the world sees the generosity of God, and everything depends upon how the human spirit responds to this divine display of good will” and disturbing grace.

“Now, in this parable comes, ironically, the most challenging and offensive word of all: **God is generous.** God's generosity” and disturbing grace “spill over the levees we have built to contain it”—levees that try to limit who is welcomed into our churches and who we reach out to—“and surges mercifully over the landscape of human life. The rush of God's generosity and grace bears away in its flood every rickety shack built on human schemes of merit and this world's view of goodness. Whose spirit can match the mercy of God? Finally, only one human being was capable of that –Jesus,” who was God’s disturbing grace in the flesh; who died for all of the world regardless of when we respond to God’s call to labor in the kingdom of heaven.

If you think God’s disturbing grace is unfair and shown unequally, do not write your complaint to “the Feds in DC” or the legislature two blocks to the north. But take it before the Lord as did the Hebrews, and God may give you an abundance of “manna and quail” even though you may not deserve it.

If you like how God’s disturbing and generous grace works, go and do likewise. The world may call you a loser and put you in last place. But God will lift you up to first place and by his disturbing and generous grace in Jesus Christ make both the deserving and undeserving winners. Fair enough? Quotes in the sermon are from Matthew by Long, pages 224-

227.