

September 24, 2023

# The Seventeenth Sunday of Pentecost

**Matthew 20:1-16**

The Reverend Garrett Yates  
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



Jesus' parable for us this morning is like an icy splash of water onto his disciples' faces – and he's trying to shake them awake to recognize the radical nature of the Kingdom of God.

On the surface, this is surely one of the strangest, most incomprehensible parables Jesus ever told. To suggest, as some do, that this is a story about everyone being equally rewarded by eternity is not true. This is one of those parables that I think resists being easily stenciled over our lives detail for detail – such that we see in it a defense of free-enterprise (the owner gets to determine the wages), or the integrity of private business, or even an argument for equal pay.

So what is the central message here?

To get a handle on things, we must remember in the first place that at that time the usual wage of a hired laborer was one denarius for one day's work. So when the householder offered and then compensated the workers a denarius at the end of the day, he was giving them the wage that was normal, accepted, fair.

The workers have no reason to be surprised at all. When they started the day, this is what they were expecting to get paid. Therefore it is clear that when the householder has a denarius paid out to each of the latecomers, there is no longer a question of a wage which they have earned. He had not even promised the latecomers this denarius, for all he said is that he would give them what was right. And they certainly didn't expect to be given so much. The householder expressly asks the grumblers whether he has not the right to be generous. What he gives the latecomers, therefore, is not an expression of wages which they've earned or of the justice that applies to masters and servants; rather it is an expression of his own generosity, that free generosity – and this for me is the central theme of the story – that incalculable mercy, that grace that cannot be reckoned up in terms of wages and justice, that generosity and mercy which ultimately prevail between us and God.

During a conference on comparative religions in the middle of last century, scholars of religion from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods' appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

Grace isn't just the central message of the parable; it's the central

message of why we gather as Christians. Grace says that all that hangs on the free gift of the love of God – from distant galaxies to buzzing electrons, from angels to aerosols. It’s all given, resting on the infinite act of God – none of us, it turns out, asked to be created, merited our existence, or somehow earned consciousness and now health and longevity. Grace is the truth that humbles and raises us up.

“Grace,” sings St. Bono, “she takes the blame, she covers the shame, removes the stain; grace finds beauty in everything.”

This past week, I convinced my mom to join me at the movies to see *Oppenheimer*, which I sensed Katie wasn’t going to be down for. Christopher Nolan’s visually stunning film, at one level, draws the viewer in by his depiction of a graceless world. Robert J. Oppenheimer was a man of drive and immense intellect, not to mention a penchant for philandering around. His Promethean desire to ascend fused with his intoxicating love of power made him a man whose genius was tempered by one thing, his pride. And Oppenheimer, though given a chance to take on the Manhattan Project – which might seem like a grace extended him – was, really, so the last half of the movie reveals, a way to make him a pawn in the hands of the state. Because of early affiliations with the communist party, Oppenheimer is later blacklisted, and his security clearance revoked. Oppenheimer portrays a graceless world, perhaps no better captured than in Nolan’s black and white depictions of the law, both a literal and metaphorical device since a large swath of the movie is presented in searing black and white color palette. Men and their motives are compartmentalization with absolutist precision as either good or evil. And yet, Nolan bestows a kind of grace on it by not letting his viewer settle in a black and white reading of the plot. Through stunning images, an exquisite score, and a propulsive plot, Nolan inclines the viewer to sympathize with Oppenheimer, the man who appeared to know a lot about a lot of things, grace not being one of them. And yet in his angst and his wrestling with the devastating effects of his creation, he is humbled – the Promethean god man is made a touch more human – and Nolan’s story draws attention to the ancient human struggle waged in every heart between creation and destruction. Great art, at its core, bestows grace. And while no one in the film can manage to extend it, Nolan leaves the viewer reflecting if they could be a moment of grace in an otherwise grace-less world.

Well and good – it’s hard to argue the beauty of grace in art. But before God, our questions for the text still press in on us: the interpreter wants to know why everyone gets paid the same amount. Does God not care how we live our lives? Does God not

care that some grow and extend his love, while others seem rather preoccupied with other things? As Nolan's Oppenheimer depicts: we live in a grace-starved world. We live in the world of winners and losers, givers and takers, those with and those without. And I suppose that there is no small part of us that wonders if there is any grace for us in this world? We notice Grace in art and culture, but how do we notice God's grace in our own lives?

Consider the unspoken grace we've all been given. The denarius in each of our pockets.

As I see it, grace is less a thing that comes to us from outside and is more just the very life we've been given. Rather, the denarius we've all been given is our very own selves, just as we are: with our life, with our temperament, with our family, with our surroundings, with our time, with our heredity, with that ancient battle between creation and destruction waged in our souls. And really, when we grumble about our earnings, or we grumble about another whom God has dealt differently, we are really refusing to accept our own selves from the hands of God.

The difficult parable really teaches us a rather simple point: we are those who receive the denarius, and we ourselves are the denarius. For we receive ourselves, with our destiny, with our freedom certainly and with whatever we choose to do with that freedom, but ultimately what we receive is ourselves. This we must receive – and this is harder than it sounds – not just without grumbling, without inward protest, but with good will and gratitude, because it is given to us by a God who asks us: "Do you begrudge my generosity?" This, it seems to me, is our great life's work: to accept ourselves as the mysterious and gradually revealed gift of the immeasurable grace of God.

Every part of us – even the parts that feel painful and mysterious – is a gift of God. And to accept a gift from God, is to welcome God himself. In giving you yourself, God gives himself – the gift always bearing the giver's fingerprints.

Plus in the end, we are probably all latecomers – all a little slow to recognize the immensity of God's free grace. And yet, we must draw our gaze away from ourselves, and see the generosity of God unfolding all around us. This is the work of prayer and Christian maturity. To gain the vision to see God not as distant and begrudging, but as here, and now. Less a one-time thing, and more, so we discover, the plain fact underwriting our lives, more like our heartbeat, or better still like our breath – something we can't ever produce, and yet is ever-present as a gift, energizing us into more life.