

Radical Grace

Sermon by Linda Motter

Damascus United Methodist Church

Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; St. Matthew 20:1-16

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost – September 18, 2011

What did we just hear? Jesus' parable of *The laborers in the vineyard* doesn't sit right. It hits a nerve. Our sense of right and wrong says, "That's not fair, God! People who work longer should receive more pay!" But, we're not the first humans to complain to God.

Both of today's scripture readings involve grumbling and complaining. Our Exodus passage occurs after the Hebrew people have escaped Pharaoh. Imagine this, our spiritual ancestors just experienced God's miracle by crossing the Red Sea. And already, they are wishing they had stayed in Egypt! Because of the circumstances facing them, God's chosen people complain, "God, you've us them into the wilderness to starve and die!" Why is it -- especially when life becomes difficult—that humans so easily forget that God provides radical grace (also known as unexpected generosity)? And, what does radical grace say about God's relationship with us? Let's consider two possibilities.

First, radical grace shows that God cares about us. This is evident in Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard. It tells us about the kingdom of God. In the parable, God is the landowner and humans are the workers. In God's kingdom, God is in control. Sometimes, as humans, we get caught up in believing that God works according to human standards. However, God works according to God's standards. This means that God cares for us in many ways that we cannot humanly comprehend.

For example, purely from a business sense, this parable makes absolutely no logical sense. If a business ran on a radical grace concept, it would go bankrupt very soon. Making a profit would be a dream. Plus, the business would suffer from strife among the employees.

Imagine if you were one of the workers who began work at 8 am, you would so have it in for those workers who began working at noon, 3 or 5 pm and still received equal pay. It would be too hard not to resent them over the unfairness of it all. Yet God's economy is not based on *fairness*. God's economy is based on *grace*. And God uses that grace in a radical way to show us how much God cares.

In God's kingdom, God wishes to be in relationship with everyone. God offers life-long opportunities to do so. The more 'radical grace' that God offers means more people who come into relationship with God!

But, to the workers who worked the longest in the vineyard, the concept of radical grace feels unfair. Why should they receive equal pay along with those workers who

worked less? From God's viewpoint, since the pay results in an eternal relationship with God, the more that radical grace is given, the better. Yes, radical grace shows that God cares about us.

Secondly, radical grace shows we are to put our trust and hope in God. What does it take sometimes to get this through to humans? In the Exodus reading, the Hebrew people had just witnessed a miracle in crossing the Red Sea. What were the chances of that happening? When Moses parted the waters and they crossed on the sea bed, didn't this let them know they could trust God? Or did their poor memories keep them from recalling what God has just miraculously done? How could they be so short-sighted? But, are we any different?

Think for a moment about an instance where it seemed like everything was going wrong in your life. Yet, God provided a way -- maybe not in the timing or in the way you wished-- but God provided a way through your struggle. In the end, you could look back at the process and proclaim, "Yes, thanks be to God!" I made it through!

As believers, we have hope that God will provide for us. We are assured of this because God's kingdom is not based on rewards. In a society that says competition and merit determine our value, God says differently. God's radical grace confuses society's expectations. In God's eyes, all people are equally invited to the kingdom of God. From God's viewpoint, the person who is in a Christian relationship with God for a human lifetime is as valuable as the person who becomes repentant and changes only toward the end of life. God's grace is ironic and does not fit the usual ideas of justice. God's choice to give us radical grace says that, above all, *God wants to be in relationship with us!* This is a living God we can hope and trust in!

God's radical grace still operates today -- two thousand years after Jesus first shared this parable. It happened to a family right here in DUMC. I will share their story and change the names to protect privacy.

One night, Larry received a dreaded phone call from his Mom, Gwen. Gwen tearfully shared with Larry that his father, Harold, had just died. Harold had been a longtime smoker who had kicked the habit cold turkey 10 years ago. But after exercising that night, as Harold was getting ready for bed, he suffered a heart attack and died instantly. Shocked and saddened, Larry drove to his parents' home to be with his Mom and help make arrangements for his Dad's funeral.

As Larry thought about his last visit with his Dad just 6 weeks ago, he was thankful they had shared more personal conversation than ever before. They even shared that they loved each other for the first time. But when talking with his wife, Larry said he didn't know what to think about his Dad's spiritual beliefs. Harold had always made it known that he did not welcome religious faith discussions. So, no one ever talked to Harold about such things. Larry didn't know what his Dad believed, and, honestly, now he wished he had had those faith discussions -- invited or not.

When Larry got to his Mom's house, the pastor came over to plan the service. The pastor made mention of Harold's recent church membership. Larry's eyes perked up..."You mean MY DAD joined the church?" The pastor answered, "Your Mom didn't tell you?" Larry replied, "No, what do you mean?" The pastor explained that Harold had attended the new member classes with Gwen who always planned on joining the church. Harold was just along for the ride.

The day for joining came, and Gwen went to church early to play in the bell choir. As the worship time neared, there was no Harold. Five minutes until the service, and still no Harold. It was nearly worship time when Gwen looked up in the doorway and couldn't believe her eyes. There stood Harold with his hands in his pockets and his foot scuffing the ground. With his head hung, he said he figured he would go ahead and join the church. After all, he had attended all those new member classes.

The same 3 questions about Christian belief were asked in that church that we ask at DUMC: Do you reject sin's hold on your life? Do you believe In Jesus Christ as your lord and savior? And, will you resist evil in whatever disguises it presents itself? Larry learned from the pastor that Gwen and Harold, *miraculously together*, had taken the vows of Christian belief and membership on Sunday around noon. Just 32 hours later, Harold died from a heart attack.

But, because of God's radical grace, Harold was in eternity with God! Larry's heart could hardly contain his joy! He called his wife and shared the good news. They rejoiced in knowing that God's radical grace had provided for Harold. To this day, rather than grumble or complain, they continue to put their trust and hope in our living God who graciously and miraculously provides for all.

Jesus said, "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last." God's perspective includes as many people as possible. Consider where in your life, God's unexpected generosity is reaching out to you. Thanks be to God for radical grace!