

*“God’s Mountainous Grace”*

*Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16*

*September 21, 2014*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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Two thoughts merge to begin this message. First, we have visitors every week and today is no exception, except as pastor I have the privilege of giving a “shout out” to Carol’s cousin Angela, visiting from Boston, and Angela’s son Diondre, a freshman and ROTC cadet at the University of New Hampshire. To them and all visitors, welcome!

The second thought is that my mom’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday would have been this past Thursday. Most of you know she died in 2012. So these two thoughts—visitors and the pastor’s mother—merge in the story of an older woman who walked into church. The friendly usher greeted her, smiled warmly and gave her a hearty welcome and a bulletin.

*“Where would you like to sit?” he asked politely. “The front row, please,” she answered. The usher replied in a whisper “You really don’t want to do that. The pastor is really boring.”*

The woman stiffened and said *“Do you happen to know who I am?”* *“No,”* he replied. She said indignantly, *“I’m the pastor’s mother.”* The usher quickly replied, *“Do you know who I am?”* *“No,”* she said. *“Good,”* he answered.

This story connects to the message, “God’s Mountainous Grace,” more than it first appears. Most of us have heard of grace, the love of God freely given. A wonderful acronym for G-R-A-C-E shared by Rich Perregaux is “God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense.” Either way, don’t decide I’m boring...yet. Let’s look again at grace in the Gospel story.

Jesus starts “For the kingdom of heaven is like....” And, because of that, we sometimes think this is a story about final judgment when in God’s economy God’s love equals things out. God’s grace is granted equally to the believer who has labored in the church her whole life AND to the dying person who accepts God’s grace after a life squandered by sin. Grace is grace—we do not earn it, we do not deserve it and, in the end, God’s settles the accounts as God chooses.

But it is also a “here and now” story, and that is—more often, I believe—why it generates such heated response. There is an inherent injustice in everybody getting paid the same wage, even though some worked a full day and some work an hour. We especially take that view if we are diligent in our work or have been taken advantage of by someone who has not.

Besides, the landowner seems guilty of a variation of “bait and switch.” After hiring all the workers, he **first** pays the last hired—who worked only one hour—a full day’s wage. Everyone can get excited about that! Even the workers at the back of the pay line, who have been working since 6 a.m., marvel at this strange but wonderful event. Then, they start to calculate. “Will we get 12 days wages (the workday was 12 hours) for our work today?” they wonder. By the time they near the pay clerk they’ve stopped wondering. We can imagine they’ve calculated the extra, begun to count on it and already mentally spent half of it.

Then, the paycheck. Oops! The usual day’s wage. By this time they’ve forgotten the joy they felt for their fellow workers. They’ve forgotten that they received a fair day’s wage, exactly what they agreed on with the owner. They’re outraged! After all, shouldn’t the landowner be generous to all? If it’s all going to equal out anyway, why bother to work at all? Part of our problems is that we identify with the last hired workers. We want to earn our keep, deserve what we get, and get what we deserve...well, we might want to rethink that one a bit!

88 people did this week, you know? Re-think getting what they deserved. This past Monday they were in the drive up window of a Chick-Fil-A restaurant in Texas, as reported by KFOR-TV in Oklahoma City. They got the food they ordered, all right. They just didn’t have to pay. The guy in front of them, name unreported, placed **his** order and paid with ten \$100 bills, telling the cashier to pay for everyone behind him as far as the money would go. When asked why he was doing this he said, “Mondays are tough and I just want everyone to have a good day.” That’s one way to consider “grace.”

Another is employment. If you've ever been unemployed, you know. Empty days of searching and worrying, hopes and frustrations endlessly intertwined. Consider grace from this perspective. To have meaningful work, or at least work that is steady and puts food on the table, to know you won't have to go home to disappointed faces and hungry stomachs because you couldn't get work that day—that's grace.

So the workers hired at 6 a.m. receive a great grace. They are free from worry and free to work hard. Some might object "Yes, but they were the early bird up to get the worm before those other slackers." Uh-huh. And where exactly did we hear that in the story? Because it isn't there. In major cities all across Connecticut there are day laborers. Perhaps there are in Milford, too. It is not by virtue that some are chosen and others not. It just happens. The boss says, "You, you and you" and those are the ones who work. Others wait to be called.

In fact, those hired at 9, Noon and 3 p.m. are also given grace in the form of release from fear. They will, after all, get to work today. They were beginning to think this another empty, meaningless day. As the hours wore on they began to count the day as lost. Then, in the midst of worry, just as they are giving up, they are saved by grace.

But there is even more! We have hardly glanced at the landowner. If in fact this is a story about grace, and if the landowner represents God, then we need also to look at what God is doing.

What God is doing in this story, in the guise of the landowner, is a most curious thing. In Bible times the gap between landowner and laborer was about as wide—economically and socially—as you could get. Think "CEO" or "CFO" when you hear "landowner." There were many layers in between: managers, foremen, shift supervisors, other servants. It ought to strike us as very curious that a landowner would personally go out looking for workers. If anything it would have been the other way around: workers going to the great estates asking, even begging, for work. At the very least, if workers were to be sought out, the landowner would send someone else.

But this landowner—like this story, like grace itself—turns everything upside down. The landowner goes looking for them. Once. And again. And again. And again. How odd. Even more, he goes out at five p.m., just an hour before quitting time. What boss with prudence and business sense hires workers an hour before quitting time, never mind paying them as if they'd worked all day. But he's the boss. And that's the "clincher" in the story that so rankles some of us. Says the boss to the disgruntled among us: *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"*

Now I need your help. Picture in your mind's eye your favorite mountain range. Maybe you've seen it in person in pictures. Close your eyes if that helps you "see" better. Maybe you're seeing eastern mountains: the Whites of New Hampshire, the Greens of Vermont or the Great Smokies of Virginia and North Carolina. Perhaps the rugged west is your favorite: the Grand Tetons of Wyoming, Colorado's Front Range, California's Sierra Nevada or the peaks of Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. Maybe you've traveled to the Alps, the Andes or the Himalayas; or the islands of the Caribbean, Hawaii or Japan, which are simply mountains rising from the bottom of the sea. Any single peak is terrific. But there are more and more, one after another, so much to see and experience that you can hardly take it in.

God's grace is like that: mountainous, filling up our senses with wonder and awe. Breathtaking, magnificent. If we saw only one mountain, experienced just a piece of God's grace, we would know we are blessed beyond measure. But God does not stop with just a little.

The grace in the story is extended to all. God seeks us out. God invites us to meaningful work. God reassures those who respond early by removing fear and doubt. God doesn't seek us out just once but again and again. It is never too late. Even up until quitting time the invitation is still good. Grace is not just the **end** of the story but the **cause** of the story. This grace, granted us by "the hound of heaven," our merciful God, never gives out and never gives in and is with us until the close of our days. Amen.