

Exodus 16: 2- 15  
Philippians 1: 20-30  
Matthew 20: 1-16

Is Grace Free or Fair?  
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I've shared an old story with you before, but I'd like to tell it again. Folk tales are like that – it does not hurt to hear them multiple times. This one comes from the Jewish tradition...though some say that before that, it was an Arab tale, and before that, an Indian tale. So who knows?

A farmer that had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and he taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm and when the father died, they had found their working together so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. So each brother contributed what work he could and during every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had corporately produced. Across the years the elder brother never married; he stayed single. The younger brother did marry and had eight wonderful children. Some years later when they were having a good harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of his harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he is already asleep, I'll take some of what I have put in my barn and I'll slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children.

At the very time he was thinking those thoughts, the younger brother was thinking to himself, "God has given me these eight wonderful children. My brother hasn't been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for sustenance in his old age than I do, but I know him. He's much too fair. He'll never renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over into his barn. This went on for a few days, with a lot of confusion about extra food showing up and a lot of midnight trips. But one night when the moon was full, as you may have already guessed, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. The old storytellers say that there though wasn't a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. God was weeping for joy because two of his children had come to a new wisdom. Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy and because we are made in God's image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well. Life is not fair. It's not fair because it's rooted in grace. How do we fallible human beings measure this kind of generosity?

But the stories from Scripture we have read today are not those of devoted brothers. One is a story of a nomad people who fear starvation. The other is a story about day laborers, at the bottom of the economic heap. Does grace operate even in more desperate circumstances?

Refugees have always been among the most vulnerable groups in the world. Whether they were refugees because of famine, or war, or because they were escaping slavery, as the Israelites were, they had no apparent security. Everything had to be carried with them, in their hands or on their backs or the backs of their donkeys. They had no clear maps. Water was scarce. They did not stay anywhere long enough to grow crops or find work. They were vulnerable to attack from other

nomadic groups. Even though our Exodus story gives them a powerful leader, Moses, with direct access to God, there's no denying that the people would often be terrified and depressed. They were discouraged enough to wish they had stayed in Egypt, enslaved and in a situation of ethnic cleansing and infanticide. Either they were *really* depressed, or they were being overly dramatic when they wailed, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in *Egypt*..." Understandably, Moses, Aaron, and God are a bit peeved.

But, it is the nature of God to be gracious. It just doesn't happen in the way they expect. Quail and manna – a whole new portable desert cuisine. It keeps them alive as long as they don't try to store it, hoard it, or sell it. God was providing what everyone needed, and not allowing anyone to try to get ahead of anyone else. If you went out in the morning and worked twice as hard to gather twice as much as you needed, to try and get ahead, it would go putrid on you and you'd be left with nothing. Trying to gather extra was seen as both an insulting vote of no-confidence in God's ability to provide enough each day, and as an insulting attempt to outshine your neighbors. The manna was a sign of God's generosity to all, not an opportunity to try to get ahead of others, even those we might consider lazy or unproductive or unworthy. The word "manna" means "what is it?" because it was a strange new substance, and a strange new way of living: truly dependent, day by day, on God's creative grace.

This runs counter to human nature, doesn't it... maybe that's why it is described as a miracle. It is really multiple miracles: the miracle of learning to follow directions, the miracle of letting go of greed, and the miracle of not trying to control God's gift of abundance. Human nature works against this. The wheels would be turning in their heads: "We can take this extra manna and we can sell it! Or we can barter it with other folks we meet out here in the wilderness. There is a huge untapped market for free food here! We'll be rich and we can retire when we're 40!" Manna is a miracle because none of this happens, but they all eat.

This story needs to be told, over and over, because the other feature of human nature shown here is forgetfulness, or selective memory. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author who once lived in Vermont, wrote "The belly is an ungrateful wretch, it never remembers past favors, it always wants more tomorrow."

Day laborers have always been amongst the most easily exploitable people in the world. At the time that Jesus told his parable, these laborers would be peasants without land, impoverished and powerless. No unions, no job security and no benefits. Even indentured servants would be better off because they'd have a contract. The day laborers would have to line up every morning, waiting for a foreman to come by and point to them, relying completely on the chance that someone needed workers for that day. Then, as now, the inequity of supply and demand would keep day laboring wages low, which masks the critical role that day laborers have played and still play in agriculture, mining, fishing, building, and caregiving work.

Now, Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard is not a miracle story... or is it? By the way, what is it the titles of parables? Who decided that this was the parable of the laborers in the vineyard? Why not the parable of the Generous Landowner or the Unfair Landowner, or the Landowner Who Plans the Work Day Poorly? Surely it is the actions of the landowner, not those of the laborers, which really drives the story. Or why not the parable of The Survival of the Weakest? Or maybe just the parable of Crazy, Unfair Grace.

Because just like the plot of the Exodus story, it goes against human nature. It goes against what we want and need, which is for life to make sense. It would sound like Good News only to those 5 o'clock hires. We have to assume that Jesus was giving a message of grace to those who come late. Jesus is talking not to the establishment but to the newcomers. Jesus was preaching God's merciful acceptance of the excluded and the poor. We just happen to be eavesdropping on this one.

This is a "Kingdom of God" parable. The landowner's gesture would be an example of a justice that expresses the values of God's Kingdom: a superior kind of justice that exceeds the righteousness of the religious establishment. It goes beyond legal regulations and human merit, and it is an example for communities of faith for teaching and learning the meaning of mercy and grace. The parable shows how God loves, cares for, and saves people who clearly do not deserve such divine mercy by any human measurement. As with so many parables, it expresses the uncomfortable, counterintuitive "scandal of the gospel": that God affirms (or even prefers?) the full humanity of the "excluded."

The truth is that many people vacillate between feeling like they are entitled or like they are excluded; that they are not good enough or that they deserve greater affirmation; that they do not belong in church because of their history of sin or that they are so good that they don't need a church.

When we are feeling like we are not good enough to receive the grace of God, that is precisely when the message of grace comes through. Because no one can do anything to win it or earn it. We have all come too late to earn grace as a wage.

Remember, this parable is not a blueprint for labor practices or economic systems any more than the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a manual on parenting or the Parable of the Great Banquet a guidebook of table etiquette. We know that any company that paid people who work one hour a day the same as it paid full-time workers would soon have a hard time finding employees willing to show up at nine. Even so, this parable works on our imaginations in ways that do have implications for the marketplace and economic justice. It allows us to cross over for a moment into an alternate world, one that operates on generosity rather than greed, ambition, and competition. It allows us to experience a world in which those who are standing on the street corner, seemingly idle and useless and burdensome, are nevertheless of great value to God. They are worthy of God's notice and love, entitled, by God, to live with dignity each day. The parable is showing the ways that God does not behave according to human nature - thank goodness - but instead overflows like a fountain of grace and generosity. And when we let the parable work on our imaginations that way, it turns out that we can no longer look at a parking lot of farm laborers who are paid an unfair wage, or at the refugee who complains that they haven't eaten in days, or at any who are viewed as disposable, and rest easy.

OK, one more story....

A woman was met at heaven's gate by St. Peter, who said, "It will take 1,000 points for you to be admitted. Points will be determined by the way you lived." The woman said, "Unless I was sick, I attended worship every Sunday and sang in the choir." "That's 50 points," said St. Peter. "What else?" "I gave a good deal of money to the church," the woman said. "Well", said St. Peter, "I think that's worth 25 points. Anything else?" Realizing she had only 75 points, the woman began to get desperate. "I taught Sunday school for 10 years." "That's great, but it's worth only 25 points," said

St. Peter. The woman became frantic. “You know,” she said, “at this rate the only way I’ll get into heaven is by the grace of God!” Peter smiled and said, “That’s worth 900 points! Come on in!”

I like the stories where God weeps tears of joy when two brothers find each other in acts of surreptitious giving. I like the stories where bread comes down from the sky to feed the refugees from slavery. I like the stories where the landowner scurries around finding every last unemployed worker. I like them because they give me hope that God will find me too, and find you, ready to go into the Kingdom Vineyard together. I think we’ll be too busy working and telling stories as we pick grapes together to be measuring God’s grace.