



September 20, 2020
Matthew 20:1-16
16th Sunday after Pentecost

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Receiving More Than Deserved

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

On a trip to Boise, ID in 2003BK (before kids), I stayed with friends in their apartment. We were all just beginning to establish our lives and they were living, at the time, in a one-bedroom apartment. I was trying to save money on the trip and they invited me to stay on their pull-out couch. Which was a gracious gift to save me the cost of a hotel room. And after a first night filled with conversation and laughter, we pulled out the couch into a bed and I went to sleep. The next morning, before the sun, I woke up to a large, orange tail sliding across my face. Their cat had decided to greet me. I do not remember his name, but I remember him being a rather large cat with an even larger attitude. He had wanted no part of me the night before and due to a cat allergy, I was quite content to be left alone. Well that first morning, I pushed his tail off of my face and then nudged him off the sofa bed with my knee. And on his way, he went. I never saw the cat again that first day. And after a full day of touring and talking – I headed to bed. The cat – made a brief appearance on the sofa bed and then disappeared for the night. The next morning – the cat's tail was again in my face. This time I was less kind and pushed him away – to which he responded with the swipe of his claw and then jumped off the bed. I got up – my friends came out of their bedroom and poured some coffee. Well we were talking; I stripped the sheets off the sofa bed and then closed up the sofa. I heard a groan or a grunt – but to me it sounded like a spring in the sofa. A few minutes later, my friend asked her husband if he had seen the cat to which he replied no. And then we all heard another sound coming from the sofa. And I realized I had closed up the sofa bed with the cat inside! I ran back to the sofa with my friend and we began to pull the cushions off to open the sofa bed and a few seconds later – that large orange cat exploded out of the sofa bed and took off for the safety of the bedroom. I never saw the cat again during the rest of my stay there. But I imagined that his eyes were on me the whole time I was in the apartment just waiting to strike back.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

I am always struck by those who have labored all day and complain to the landowner about the wage they are paid. I do not see the wrong taking place. The landowner offered the laborers a fair wage and the laborers worked all day for the promised wage. All was received as was promised. Those who worked all day were not upset until they witnessed the generosity of the landowner who paid the full day wage to those who worked for only an hour in the afternoon. I wonder where you see yourself in the story. I wonder how we might see the world in which we live within this story. I do not believe Jesus ever tells a story without a significant meaning to give. And for us today this story again reminds us that the Kingdom of God has come near. And, funny enough, when the Kingdom of God comes near – those of us who believe we already have both feet firmly

planted in the kingdom sometimes get a little uncomfortable when the grace of God pours freely to those, we sometime believe, do not deserve such extravagance for their lack of commitment, or effort or, dare I say, faith.

For many of us, I would be led to believe, we see ourselves as those who worked a full day. We are the ones who put in the effort – take on the challenge – learn to do a new thing. We are the ones who show up. Who put in our time. Who follow the rules. Who do what is expected of us. We are the ones who work hard, pay our dues, follow-through, save money for retirement, and plan for the future. And if you believe yourself to be in that category – how is it possible that you are upset at the generosity of the landowner who gives as he chooses? So today perhaps I am the laborer who worked all day. Which begs the question -- who is the one who receives a full day's wage for so little work? Can you see where this is going? As soon as any of us who work all day, believe we deserve more than those who work only for the last bit of the afternoon – the extravagance of our God is lost on us. And like the cat in the sofa bed, we are ready to point out the injustice. Like the laborer who worked all day – we grumble – we say “it is not fair,” we argue against what we perceive to be a “handout.” When the generosity of our God was never ours to determine in the first place. I wonder if you could do a hard thing this day – well a hard thing for many of us anyways – I wonder could you put yourself in the person of the laborer who worked only an hour at the end of the day? Even harder still – could you put yourself in the person of the landowner who offers abundantly and equally regardless of the work completed? My guess is that this is too hard for some of us. Not because you are not generous but because your generosity comes with conditions. Imagine for a moment, that Jesus loved us in such ways – that his death on the cross – for each of us – came with conditions. How much do you give to the church? Do your children go to church? Have you been faithful to your spouse? How many friends – who look different than you do – can you claim in this life? Have you let your political beliefs overwhelm your belief in God and God's mission in the world? Who have you sacrificed for in this life?

And yet Jesus tells us this story to both point out the self-righteous judgment of those who received what they were promised and the overwhelming extravagant love of God to all of us who do not deserve it. And maybe that is the heart of this story Jesus tells us this day. If you found yourself identifying with the workers who labored all day – why did you not identify with the worker who only worked one hour but still received a full day's wage? Too often, we are the large, orange cat ready to pounce instead of the humbled, beloved child of God receiving more than we ever deserved simply because God is the one who gives. My friends – it was never about the amount of the work you completed – it has been, always is, and always will be about the overwhelming, all-consuming generous grace of our God who gives without end.

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” Both questions come from the very mouth of our God – and we can choose to be afraid to have those questions asked of us or we can celebrate that we are the ones who receive such generosity. To the great glory of God. Amen.