

Sermon – Matthew 20:1-16; Jonah 3:10—4:11
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
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“The Economics of Grace”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I first visited Lutherland 20 years ago. I was a freshly minted seminary graduate, taking a break for additional studies before ordination. What better way to spend a week than exploring the geography of grace? I travelled with a friend through Leipzig, Eisenach, and Wittenberg, scenes of so many Reformation breakthroughs, reminders that God engages the world primarily and finally through grace. Attempting to return to school in Scotland, however, my friend and I were reminded in the harshest way that the world is, well, harsh. Not graceful. To be clear, I don't mean vindictive or mean-spirited. Just harsh. We awoke that morning in Berlin. From that moment on, everything that could go wrong did. We missed a bus, then a train, seemingly by seconds each time. But too late is too late, and by the time we made it Berlin-Schönefeld Airport, we were *decidedly* too late. Our bird had flown. No one had worried about or waited for us. The schedule was the schedule, and we had missed it. Fortunately, there was another flight eleven hours later for which we had the pleasure of paying. Grace is a nice idea, but it's no way to operate an airport or run a business. For that, we need timetables, ledgers, and schedules. Such things get the last word in this world.
2. Given that grace is no way to run a business, the outraged legalism of the all-day workers in Jesus' parable today is to be expected. Understandable, even. The landowner, apparently with a bumper crop on his hands, needs all the

- labor he can get. He hires throughout the day in a scramble to get the work done. Upon seeing the manager give a full day's wage to those who only worked an hour, those who bore the burden of the full day begin to imagine that their wages would increase. After all, ten or twelve times the work is worth ten or twelve times the pay. But that's not how it plays out. As Frederick Buechner puts it, "Johnny-come-lately gets as big a slice of the worm as the early bird." What sort of business model is that? Not one that will create long-term success in this world. Why, if this is how he operates, no one will ever show up to work on time again! No, better to let those who are late have less, if not be left behind entirely.
3. This weekend was homecoming at several area high schools and, speaking of late, that's how high schoolers might have been tempted to sleep today. Kudos to the youth who made it to worship! If the late-sleeper is one high school stereotype, we are presented with another in our Old Testament reading. To be sure, the prophet Jonah is not actually a teenager, but he presents another stereotype of adolescence – although, to be fair, plenty of adults act this way, too. When things don't go Jonah's way, the petulant prophet walks off in a huff to sulk. What's he so mad about? He's upset because God acted *exactly* how he knew God would act. Jonah spent three days proclaiming that God was about to punish the people of Nineveh for their evil ways. And his prophetic speech works! The people, from king to child, repent. And God, full of compassion and love, relents. How dare God let them off the hook? Who among us has not wondered why God has not brought vengeance or misfortune down upon the heads of the wicked? Why does God have to be so graceful?
 4. Before moving to Oak Park, our family spent seven years living along the Grand Strand, the northern coast of South Carolina. A favorite pastime among residents was bemoaning how crowded it was getting with all the people relocating from wintry north to the sunny beach. They were glad there had

been enough room for them but weren't sure there was room for more. My point is not to pick on my South Carolina friends. It's that such thinking is emblematic of humans everywhere. We are glad that there is just enough space and grace for us, but surely there isn't enough for those people. It's Jonah all over again. But as God makes clear to the prophet, God's space is infinite and God's grace rushes past all the lines we put down.

5. Back to the vineyard, that's exactly the point. God is much less interested in being fair than in getting everyone in on both the work and the reward. One way to read this parable is that those who had been idle throughout the day are lazy ne'er-do-wells. And surely, they were among the crowd, and Jesus reminds us that there is grace and forgiveness for them. But can't we imagine others? Those who were late because they lack access to public transportation or needed accommodations? Those who live with chronic illness, physical or mental? Those who by the chance or circumstance of their birth simply could not catch up with those more privileged? Too often in this world, such people are simply left behind or relegated to second-class status. No doubt that is true for some in our pews. So, know this: the ways of this world are not the ways of the Kingdom of Heaven. God does not deal with us as one who is beholden to bottom lines or responsible to profit-hungry shareholders. God insists on making room for all of us, each of us, simply because God's character is compassion. In the death of Jesus, God has put to death the old ways of keeping score and marking worth. In the resurrection of Jesus, God has raised us up to a place none of us has earned, and just so we find ourselves forever on equal footing, no matter what this world says.
6. Later this morning, we'll pray that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. Today's parable pushes us in new directions. While it is not meant to be a textbook on economics, it *is* a call to new priorities. To more equitable distribution of resources. To caring for those in need. To viewing people as having intrinsic value, not as having worth based on productivity. And to

begin viewing ourselves in this way, too. We already have all we need. Paul proclaims: living is Christ and dying is gain. Christ has already paid the wages of our salvation, and death – that end of the workday that comes for all – is now the gateway to eternal life. We labor in the vineyard not to earn a reward, but in thanksgiving for the promise. We cannot be reduced to the work we do, to our successes and failures. We are children of God, enlivened by the One who conquered death.

7. In a few minutes, we will make our way forward to this altar, or the gifts of the altar will make their way to you in your pew. Whether you are at the front of the line or the last to receive, you will get exactly the same amount, which is everything God has to give. The fullness of God in Christ, broken and shed for you. God gives grace fully, not in fractions. In the abundance of the Kingdom that will one day come, there is always room for more. In the geography of grace, there is always room for you. Jonah wasn't happy, but he was right: God's character is consistent, and God's compassion and love get the last word. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.