

Amazing Grace  
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church  
September 18, 2011

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

NRSV

<sup>1</sup> "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup> and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. <sup>5</sup> When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup> And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' <sup>7</sup> They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' <sup>8</sup> 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.' <sup>9</sup> When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup> Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup> And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> 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.' <sup>13</sup> 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? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

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The Sermon

Unless you are here this morning out of sheer force of habit, or because the "jury is still out" as to whether or not to commit your life to God through Christ, I presume you are here – as I am too even though standing in this pulpit – because you learned at some point that you wanted God to be in charge, not you.

I am also presuming that at some point in time – as I did – you found you were truly incapable of functioning as "Captain of the World," and that you would also let God be God in terms of the ultimate destiny of all things, while accepting the reality that human choice plays a huge role in discerning the state of our world.

At the same time, if you are at all like me, while seeking to yield yourself and the world to God's will, you continue to have an enormously difficult time of letting go of the role of being "resident critic."

At the head level you have no problem recognizing that God is infinitely more wise than you and, realistically, that God is God, after all. But that has yet to stop you from giving God a piece of your mind now and then – though typically this seems to take place in gripe sessions with like-minded folk.

Further – and tragically -- there is something in the human psyche, that makes it more difficult for us to graciously accept God's grace, than it is to accept God's judgment – when it comes to others – that is. Most of us who have been in this "seeking to be a disciple of Christ" business very long, find ourselves being more sympathetic to the "older brother" than to "the prodigal brother" in Jesus' parable as recorded in Luke.

Truth be told, we find ourselves squirming a bit when we read or hear today's parable by Jesus. We treat it like we'd treat taking Castor oil. We presume it must be good

for us, since it is Jesus telling the story, but that doesn't mean we don't have a hard time swallowing it without gagging.

We treat it like taking Castor oil that is, unless we've been in the role of "late-in-the-day recipients" of grace. Then we have a whole different view.

Been there, done that also.

The context for being a "late-in-the-day recipient of grace" was my very first class in seminary – Hebrew of all things – and it was the summer of 1991.

This class remains Imprinted on my brain and in my emotions, and in Kathy's as well as she wondered why we ever thought that my going to seminary was a good idea, although that wasn't my thinking or feeling at all going into the course. Why? Because

- ▶ I went into the course kind of cocky;
- ▶ I went in thinking the seminary was fortunate to have someone like me as a student.
- ▶ I went in feeling sorry that the others in the class didn't have the benefit of my vast educational background; only to instead go home at the end of the first week of class having flunked the first quiz, and trudging home thinking I had the slowest and dumbest brain on the North American continent.
- ▶ I went home at the end of the first week knowing I couldn't dedicate it to studying Hebrew, but rather to face a weekend to face a weekend dedicated to moving from one home to another, because the house we'd rented hadn't been ready upon our arrival.
- ▶ I went home that Friday realizing that – come Monday – I'd be even further behind my fellow students. Not a good feeling!

In the first couple of weeks everything that could go wrong seemed to. I was in physical pain because during the moving process I had injured my back.

In addition to my physical pain, I was in psychic pain due to a constant state of disorientation related to the Hebrew language. I simply couldn't seem to get used to a language that went from right to left, and back to front, and used an alphabet and lettering system that was radically different from English.

It was about this time in the course that my psychic pain and feelings of inadequacy were reduced some by the realization that part of my problem with the Hebrew language was visual, not mental. You see my bifocals weren't strong enough to see all the little dots and dashes that composed the vowels. Without such visual capacity I could not make sense out of the words that others in the class seem to make sense of so readily.

### Grace Notes

But even in the midst of all this despair there were grace notes, including:

- gracious younger students who took pity on me;
- spouse Kathy's compassion and support;

- a wise old teacher who knew all about adult learners like me.

So, even though everything within me wanted out of the pain and agony – anguish so severe that I went home one Friday afternoon and told Kathy that Hebrew had me licked and that I couldn't take it any more and that it would take a miracle to enable me to return on Monday and face another week, that miracle did happen.

I didn't crack the Hebrew text from Friday after class until Sunday evening, but when I dared open it again I started to see some patterns that I hadn't seen before. Concepts that hadn't made sense before started to make a little sense.

Just the week before I'd told my wise old professor that I had every intention of dropping the class. He told me there'd be no disgrace in doing so, but also encouraged me to stick it out till the mid-term exam.

I did, and the mid-term was that coming Friday. I didn't ace it but I didn't flunk it either. Indeed, Hebrew started making more and more sense, and I started to believe that maybe I could survive this experience after all.

### All or Nothing at All

At the start of the course distinguished professor Eugene March had said, "People get Hebrew at different rates. Some get it immediately -- some don't get it till the last day of class. Some don't get it until the second or third time they've taken the class."

"Your grade will be based on how you do on the final exam. Everything up to that point is simply to give you – and to give me --feedback on how you are doing as a student and how I am doing as a teacher."

Dr. March was a man of his word. I was one of those who didn't get it until almost the end of the course, but when I finally did get it, my passing grade was every bit as legitimate in the Registrar's records as the passing grade of the students who got Hebrew from day one, and Professor March could indeed inform the Presbyterian Church (USA) office that tracked such things that Bill Peterson had demonstrated competency in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament.

At the end-of-course party, I noted that some of my fellow students sort of begrudged my good grade. I could tell they did.

All they could picture in their minds was the whiny, disoriented old man in the class. They couldn't conceive of me doing as well – or in some cases even better -- on the final than they did.

Others, however, could celebrate fully with me -- knowing the struggle I'd been through, and feeling good that they were among those bright young scholars who were companions on the journey.

But the brains and the dullards, the whiners and the celebrators were all there in Gene and Margaret March's home for that post-class celebration knowing we'd come through a very important experience. We also knew we were there due to Gene's gifts of teaching, that led to our gift of learning.

By telling this parable of the behavior of the landlord, Jesus was working with his

disciples on something far more important than a particular subject matter needed for graduation from a seminary.

He was seeking to teach them how God thought, and how God behaved, and how they probably wouldn't like it any more than the start-of-the-day workers liked the equal pay given to the end-of-the-day workers in Jesus' parable.

In Matthew chapter 19, verses 27 and following. We read:

<sup>27</sup> Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" <sup>28</sup> Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

In essence, not just in this parable but in most every one and in most all aspects of Jesus' lifestyle, Jesus tells his followers and those listening – and those close at hand or from a distance who are observing Jesus carefully – that the Kingdom of God is upside down, to use spatial imagery, or that it begins at the end to use chronological imagery.

The more opportunities I have to be with people at or very near the end of their lives, the more sense this makes to me. It is astounding to be given the privilege time and again to see and hear the dying persons reconceptualizing the truly important dimensions and relationships of their lives and -- sometimes but not always – to be present as they share words of forgiveness, words of apology, words of conviction that don't simply alter their own ways of making sense of their lives, but sometimes alter forever ever the ways those they've loved well and those they've not embrace, forgive, thank, apologize as well, and so forth.

Further, given that I am privileged to be there as a Minister, I am graced with the opportunity to mediate their peace-making with God and, hopefully, assist in their forgiveness of themselves to the point that they can accept the grace they now maybe for the first time ever are coming to believe God will indeed grant them.

By contrast, those of us who may or may not be near death, but who have always been good little boys and girls, and who had perfect attendance records in Sunday School back in the 40s and 50s, and who are charter members of some church or another, should not expect special treatment in the Kingdom of God, and may indeed have to come to terms with the reality that all our acts of righteousness and our need to live out "be perfect" scripts, kept us from the flat out joy in living that Jesus modeled so incredibly.

This particular story also comes alive if you've ever been around cultures or settings where there are day laborers, which is what the workers in this story all are.

In Southern California, for example, it is common for landscape contractors, building contractors, and so forth to need to supplement their crews for a particular project. The contractors know that if they go to a certain highway underpass, or a designated street corner that has a vacant lot, there will be a number of folk milling around.

These aren't necessarily homeless transients, these are people waiting to be hired. Then the contractor jumps out of his truck, picks the number he needs for his project. Those picked jump in the back of his truck, and the rest can only wait -- hoping that other contractors will come along so they'll have the opportunity to work that day and bring home a little something to enable the family to live another day.. Clearly the huskiest, healthiest-appearing, and most experienced are going to get picked first. Further, as the day goes on, those left are less and less "attractive" as candidates for hire.

One can only imagine the physical and mental capabilities of those the landowner in Jesus' story found still waiting to be given work late in the day.

But does their appearance, their stature, their previous experience make them any less needy of a day's wage?

If they have a family to feed -- especially if they themselves are visibly disabled -- their families are likely to go many a day without provisions because of the appearance of the provider.

So what a thrill for them and those who rely on them, when they given a full day's wages, whatever a length of time worked.

I heard a preacher tell of a conversation with a mother who understood some of the graciousness that is exemplified in today's parable. She had raised a large number of children -- on her own. How did she do it? What guidelines could she offer to others in similar circumstances?

She was asked, "I suppose you loved all your children equally, making sure that you gave them exactly the same treatment?"

This wise mother replied, "I loved all of them, loved them greatly, but I never wanted to love them equally. I loved the one that was down till he got up. I loved the one who was weak till she got strong. I loved the one that was hurt until he was healed. I loved the one who was lost until she was found."

Grace goes beyond mere equality. Grace reaches out to love, not just equally, but extravagantly, but maybe not quite when or how we expected it to arrive.

I love the story from a few years back regarding a long-time missionary's disappointment at not being greeted with more hoopla upon his return to the states. After serving as a missionary for forty years in Africa, Henry C. Morrison became sick and had to return to America. As the great ocean liner docked in New York Harbor there was a great crowd gathered to welcome home another passenger on that boat. Morrison watched as President Teddy Roosevelt received a grand welcome home party after his African Safari.

Resentment seized Henry Morrison and he turned to God in anger, "I have come back home after all this time and service to the church and there is no one, not even one person here to welcome me home."

Then a still small voice came to Morrison and said, "You're not home yet!"