

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A Dangerous Sermon

Sunday, February 17, 2019

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

Matthew 20:8–16

Depending on your faith perspective, you are either going to like this message, or you are going to struggle with it. Either way, it is one of the most important messages a person can hear about God.

Sometimes what I do up here on Sundays is dangerous. My job is to preach the gospel. This is what you expect me to do, and this is what God called me to do. And much of the time, preaching Jesus is agreeable to virtually everyone who comes to worship.

However, some of the things Jesus taught are challenging and even offensive. Quite often, the gospel flies in the face of the values and principles we hold dear. That can create quite a predicament if you claim to follow Jesus Christ.

Truthfully, many people don't come to church to be challenged. Many people come to church because they want the faith to confirm what they already believe.

I recall a few years ago someone coming through the receiving line at the end of the worship service to tell me how much they liked my sermon. I asked, "What did you like about it?" They replied, "I agreed with it." There you have it.

As long as you're preaching about things people agree with, all is well. The problem is that Jesus often preached about things people vehemently disagreed with. Jesus did not get executed because everyone found his message wonderful and agreeable. Think about it. Why would someone as loving and kind as Jesus get executed? What did he say that made people so mad? Well, today you are going to find out. Today you are going to find out the message Jesus preached that got him killed.

We forget how controversial Jesus was. The first time he got up to preach in his hometown, he was almost murdered. The people he grew up with were so offended that they ran him out of church and tried to shove him off a cliff. How's that for sermon feedback? (Luke 4:16–30). What in the world did he say? What was his message, and why were they so offended? You'll find out today.

You see, in addition to being a gifted healer and teacher, Jesus also had a knack for ticking people off. He was good at it. He was a real instigator. If you don't

believe me, just take a look at our parable for today: The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. At first, it seems like a rather ordinary story. A farmer has a job to do. His vineyards are ready for harvest. So, he goes downtown and hires some people, agreeing to pay them the usual daily wage. He takes them to the farm. They go to work. End of story, right? Wrong. Jesus' parables are never that simple. Let's take a closer at this parable:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."

Matthew 20:1–2

A denarius was not just the daily wage for a worker, but it was also the cost of survival to the masses of poor families in Israel. A denarius would buy your family what they needed to stay alive, no more and no less. The parable continues:

³"About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵So they went." Matthew 20:3–5

So, the farmer goes back to the marketplace to hire more workers. Back then, the marketplace was like the unemployment office. If you needed work, you would go there and stand around and hope someone would hire you so that you could put food on the table for your family.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing." Matthew 20:5

These workers found work for only part of the day. And usually when you worked only part of the day, you were only partially paid. That meant your family would eat some but not enough to keep hunger pains away. If you were not able to find any work at all, then

you and your family would not eat, which is why the next part of the story is so interesting. Take a look:

“About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ Matthew 20:6–7

This farmer is odd, isn't he? He hired some men right before the end of the working day. Not only that, the farmer was more concerned with hiring people than he was with farming. He is just going back and forth hiring workers all day. But if you think that is odd. Wait until you see this!

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

⁹“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.

¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

¹³ “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you.

¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Matthew 20:8–16

And Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like that!

That doesn't make any sense does it? That's not fair! That is no way to run a farm or business. That is no way to manage life! Can you imagine how long that farmer would have lasted in business when word got out that he paid the same to all his workers regardless of how long they worked?

Yet, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like that. Like what? Like the boss announcing to everyone in the office that the part-time workers will now be getting paid the same as the full-time workers?

Like a mass email that goes out to the office announcing that the administrative assistants will now be getting paid the same as upper management?!

Like a teacher giving away A's to the whole class—not to just the good students, but to the whole class, even those who don't deserve it?!

Like those sports leagues where all the kids get a trophy?! What? Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like *that*!?

This just isn't right, is it? This parable messes with our sense of right and wrong, doesn't it? Clearly, the farmer's idea of right and our sense of right are worlds apart.

Will Willimon says that our symbol of justice, our symbol of right, is Lady Justice. He says, “There she is. We are so proud of her – blindfolded, holding scales she can't see, atop our courthouses—scales in one hand, bloody sword in the other. That is justice for us: impartial, impassive, uninvolved, blind justice. You improved the bottom line, you get the raise. You got the best grade, you go to the head of the class. You come from the best family, got the best education, and earned the most money, you get the best opportunity. Justice for us is objective, unemotional, distant, impartial, blind” (audio sermon from Willimon). That is the only way to be fair? That is right.

And Jesus comes along with this parable and blows our sense of fairness out of the water! Kinda ticks you off, doesn't it? If it does, you are in good company.

The last time I preached on this parable, a family sitting in the back walked out. My head usher told me later that as the father led the family out of church, he heard him say, “Jesus never told a story like that.”

It reminded me of an event I love to retell about Bishop Will Willimon preaching on this parable. After the service, a young lady came up to him and said, “I was really troubled by the service today.” She asked, “Where do you get these stories that you tell in your talk?” Willimon replied, “Stories? I guess I get them from growing up in South Carolina.” She said, “Well, I was really bothered by the one today. I just don't think that's any way to treat people. I mean, if you work longer than other people, you should get paid more.”

Willimon said, “Wait a minute! That's not my story, that's from Matthew.” She said, “Matthew?” He said, “Yeah, it is in the Bible.”

Willimon noticed that she was wearing an usher tag, so he asked, “Why are you ushering here?” She replied, “Well, that tall guy over there, I'm dating him. He needed somebody to usher today, so he called me,

and here I am.”

Willimon said, “I am curious. What is your religious background?” She said, “We went to church some when I was a kid, but I’m not anything really.”

Willimon said, “Well, let me tell you something. Just for your information, there is a sense in which you are the only person who got the story this morning. You found it offensive to your notion of justice. Right? Outrageous. Right? Well, just so you know, the man who told that story was later murdered for telling it. You got it. It really is an offensive, outrageous story. You got it.”

It is offensive. This parable just isn’t fair! And that’s just the point. God’s grace is not fair. This parable tells us loud and clear that God’s grace cannot be earned. It is a gift—to everyone.

It’s pretty simple. The farmer is God. The daily wage is God’s grace. And the workers are us, all of us—from the pillar of the church who has worked in God’s vineyard all their lives, to the felon who gets out of prison and joins the church: All of us get the same amount of grace.

When it comes to dispensing grace, God is not interested in being just; God wants to be generous. And that is fine with us until such an idea becomes more concrete. When we think that a man on death row gets the same amount of grace as a saint of the church, it bothers some of us. It doesn’t seem fair.

We human beings like our pecking order. We act like we don’t, but we do. We like putting people in categories and saying, “This one counts. This one doesn’t. She’s in. He’s out.”

This is why I think Jesus’ words are so tough and challenging: because Jesus is constantly obliterating our boundaries of love. We are always trying to draw lines, noting where God’s love stops. But Jesus is always erasing those lines.

You see, in the Kingdom of God, there are no outsiders. Everyone counts. That’s why God’s grace is limitless and boundless. Therefore, one can’t have more of it than another. King Duncan says, “That’s like two people who live on the ocean fighting over who has more ocean! No one can buy the whole ocean, no matter how wealthy they are. And God’s grace is far greater than any ocean, any land mass, or the entire horizon as well.” God pours out his grace on everyone, regardless if they deserve it or not.

If you are looking for a faith that is fair, don’t look to Jesus. Honestly, I am glad God is not fair. For if God were fair, who among us would be worthy of his grace? I know I wouldn’t be! Am I the only one? That’s the whole point of grace. It’s not fair. Otherwise it wouldn’t be grace.

King Duncan writes, “Writer Philip Yancey tells about an incident that occurred a few years ago. Journalist Bill Moyers created a documentary based on the hymn “Amazing Grace.” One of the more unusual scenes in the film took place at a massive benefit concert in England.

“All day, fans had been blasted with hard-driving rock music. Strangely, the concert organizers had scheduled opera singer Jessye Norman to close the concert. Fans reacted negatively when Ms. Norman first took the stage. Here was a middle-aged black woman without any back-up band, depending completely on her voice. But she silenced the crowds with her opening line: ‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound/ That saved a wretch like me!’ And soon, thousands of rock fans were singing along with this humble, life-changing hymn.

It’s been said that there are more people who know the words to “Amazing Grace” by heart than know our national anthem. Makes sense. While our national anthem is moving, Amazing Grace is transforming.

When you get down to it and boil down everything Jesus taught, it comes down to this: God’s love is limitless. It knows no bounds. It always loves. It always forgives. It never gives up on anyone. And Christ calls us to embody that same sacrificial love and forgiveness in the world.

We say the most outrageous thing every Sunday. I don’t know if you have ever noticed it. It is hard to believe we say it every Sunday, but we do. They are the most transforming words we could ever utter. We say, “Lord, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Have you ever prayed that prayer?

God never intended his boundaries to be less than the whole world. None of us have a monopoly on God’s love. And shame on us when we think we do, because when we try to restrict God’s grace to ourselves, we cut ourselves off from that very grace. Someone once said, “It is impossible to love Christ without loving others, and it is impossible to love others without moving nearer to Christ.”

Chuck Colson was once counsel to the White House and the founder of Prison Fellowship. He tells about the time he took a group of people into Indiana State Penitentiary to conduct a worship service with inmates on death row.

After the service, the visitors were checking out, doing the necessary protocol when visitors leave the prison. But Colson was concerned when he discovered that one of the visitors was missing. Well, Colson hurried back to the cell block to find the lost visitor. Well, he found him. He was sitting in a cell with one of the prisoners with his arm around his shoulder. Colson was angry. He shouted at the man, “Don’t you realize your violating our privileges here? When we’re asked to

leave, we should leave! You can cause trouble for us by lingering behind like this!”

The man looked up and said, “I’m sorry. This is James Brewer. He’s sentenced to die. I’m Judge Clement. I’m the man who pronounced the sentence upon him. Forgive me for lingering behind, but we both needed some time to forgive each other.”

If that bothers you, you have just learned why Jesus was crucified. It started in the beginning when Jesus preached one of his first sermons to his hometown crowd. In a nutshell, Jesus preached that God’s love extended to all people, even our enemies. They responded by trying to shove him off a cliff.

But that didn’t stop Jesus. He kept on preaching and demonstrating that message until the religious leaders were so mad they had to get rid of him. But the joke was on them. His very execution brought love and grace to the whole world. All of us are invited to God’s party of grace, for all of us are in need of forgiveness, redemption, and healing. All of us are equal at the foot of the cross, and we don’t have to say anything or do anything to get it. All we have to do is open our hearts to it and invite God in. Pretty amazing, right? I guess that is why they call it Amazing Grace.

Jesus is relentlessly in love with the world. And thank God for that love. Where would be without that love? And would you believe there is room in his arms for everyone? There is room. There is plenty of room.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

1. What did you find surprising about today’s parable? What did you find challenging?
2. How does today’s parable conflict with society’s idea of what is fair? What does that tell you about the grace of God?
3. Do you think God’s grace is fair? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of other “kingdom” values that conflict with the values of society?
5. Why do you think this is a “dangerous sermon” to preach?



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11180 Medlock Bridge Road Johns Creek, GA 30097
770-497-8215 www.johnscreekumc.org