

## GRACE AT THE END

Scriptures: Matthew 20:1-16, Luke 15:25-32

I have read before from this book called *Craddock Stories*, a collection of sermon stories by a retired pastor named Fred Craddock. But this one I have not shared before. He tells about preaching one Sunday on the story we heard in our first scripture lesson: the parable of the Prodigal Son. After the service a man came up to him and said,

“I really didn’t care much for that [sermon], frankly.”  
I said, “Why?”  
He said, “Well, I guess it’s not your sermon, I just don’t like that story.”  
I said, “What is it you don’t like about it?”  
He said, “It’s not morally responsible.”  
I said, “What do you mean by that?”  
“Forgiving that boy.”  
I said, “Well, what would you have done?”  
He said, “I think when he came home he should’ve been arrested” (p. 51).

That is how the older brother felt. He would not have killed the fatted calf for his derelict brother; he would have made him serve time.

Compare this to the reaction of the vineyard workers in the parable I just read. A landowner goes out at 6:00 in the morning and hires workers for his vineyard. He hires a second group at 9:00 a.m., a third group at noon, a fourth group at 3:00 p.m., and a fifth group at 5:00. Then at 6:00 p.m. they all come in to get paid, and the owner pays them all the same wages. And the 6:00 a.m. workers are mad. Are you surprised? How would you students feel if you studied hard for a test and got all the answers right, but the teacher gave the same grade to everyone in the class? How would others of you feel if you worked hard every day to make your job or your department one of the most efficient and productive in the company, but at the end of the year everyone in the company got the same raise, or this year, the same pay cut? Are you surprised that the 6:00 a.m. workers were furious?

And do you know who else was probably furious? The other vineyard owners. Because the next morning when they went out at 6:00 a.m. to hire workers, how many do you suppose they would find? They would all show up at 5:00 in the evening.

There is a strikingly similar parable told by a Jewish rabbi in the fourth century, and yet it is very different. It goes like this:

A king ... hired many laborers, one of whom so distinguished himself by industry and skill that the king took him by the hand and walked up and down with him. In the evening the laborers came, and the skillful one among them, to receive their pay. The king gave them all the same pay. Wherefore those who had worked the whole day murmured, “We have worked the whole day, and this man only two hours, and yet he also has received this whole pay.” But the king answered, “This man has wrought more in two hours than you in a whole day” (Bruner, *Matthew*, Vol. 2, p. 727).

Do you see how similar this story is, and yet how different? In the Jewish parable the two-hour worker *earned* a full day's pay, because he did more in two hours than the others did in a whole day. But there is no hint of that in Jesus' parable. Jesus does not suggest that the last workers accomplished as much in one hour as the first workers did working all day. Instead the vineyard owner says, "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?" Jesus parable is not about productivity or efficiency. It is about the shocking generosity of the owner, much like the shocking extravagance of the prodigal son's father.

This parable in Matthew, like the Prodigal Son in Luke, is all about grace. In a sense even the first workers were recipients of the owner's grace. Until the owner came along they had no job at all. That, by the way, is crucial to this story. The workers did not find the owner; the owner found them.

Friends, if you are here this morning, it is not because you found God, but because God found you. Let's be clear about this: if you have a relationship to God through Jesus Christ, if you have the hope of eternal life, if you have the support of a church family, it is not because you earned it. It is because God wanted you to have it, and so God went out looking for you and called you here. That is true whether you are a new member joining the church this morning or whether you have been here 40 years. Every one of you here was hired by God; you did not get this gig on your own.

And why did God hire you? Why did God call you here? Because God wants you. God wants your help in the vineyard. In Matthew 9:37-38 Jesus sees crowds of people coming to him needing God's help, and he says to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Why does the vineyard owner keep going out all day long looking for more workers in his vineyard? Because he wants them. God called you here because God wants you. God wants your help in the vineyard. That's why it does not matter how long you have been here. Some of the new members joining our church this morning have been coming to our church for years. I thought about asking, "Why did it take you so long to join?" But it does not matter. We are glad to have them even now. This thing we are trying to do here—this enterprise of telling our children about eternal life in Jesus, this enterprise of giving people glimpses of God's kingdom and inviting them to be part of it even while we wait for it—this thing we are doing here is so big and so important God wants all the workers God can get, and that is why it is never too soon to start, or too late.

Let me try a different comparison. I know it is time for March Madness, but we are also at the beginning of spring training for baseball, which explains why I was thinking this week about the Mariners magical season in 1995. Do any of you remember Vince Coleman? Vince Coleman joined the Mariners in mid-August of that season. He was obtained in a trade from the Kansas City Royals, and he started playing for the Mariners on August 15. The season was already three-fourths over. Vince Coleman played only 40 out of the 162 games the Mariners played that season. Yet when the Mariners won the American League west in that dramatic one game playoff with the Los Angeles Angels, Vince Coleman shared in the championship. And

when the Mariners won that incredible 5 game division play-off with the New York Yankees, Vince Coleman was right in the middle of the celebration. And not one person—not Junior, not Edgar, not Jay Buhner, not Lou Pinella—not one person said to Vince Coleman, “Hey, what are you doing here? You only played for a quarter of the season. You weren’t there as we struggled to get going in April and May. You weren’t there as we played through the hot summer months of June, July, and the first half of August, fighting to stay alive, cobbling together those come from behind wins to stay in the pennant race. You have no right to be part of this celebration. You did not share in the struggle it took to get here.” Not one person said that to Vince Coleman. Why? Because it did not matter. When Ken Griffey Jr. slid head first across home plate with the winning run in the bottom of the 11<sup>th</sup> innings sending the Mariners to the American League Championship, no one person in the Kingdom cared how many games Vince Coleman played. The team was hugging each other and jumping on each other in the middle of the field, and if you had asked any one of the players on that field that day, they would have gladly played the entire season over again just for that moment.

Friends, that celebration on the Kingdom field is nothing—nothing!—compared to the celebration we will experience when the Kingdom of God comes. That is what evening represents in the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Evening is when the payoff happens. Evening is when the things we have done to serve Jesus in this world are finally brought to fruition, when our prayers are finally answered, when cancer ravaged bodies are finally healed, when emotionally scarred hearts are made whole, when all the images of children squatting in refugee camps are replaced by the picture of a great banquet, where all God’s children have food and a home and a family. That’s where this team is headed. That’s where the workers in this vineyard are going, and all of you have been called by God’s grace to be part of it, beginning right now, not one minute too soon or too late.

- Ken Onstot  
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