

**Sunday Sermon**  
**September 24, 2017**  
**“Grace and Generosity”**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**

Introduction:

Whenever we hear a story from Jesus that begins with the words, “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .,” we can know there will be a twist, something unexpected, surprising, perhaps ironical. After all, Jesus is talking kingdom of heaven, and we think kingdom of earth. So to teach us about his kingdom Jesus gives us stories, stories called parables.

Last week we heard Peter ask a question about forgiveness. This week Peter asks a question about rewards, “Lord,” he says, “we have left everything and followed you. What will we have to show for it?” Jesus answers, “You can be sure you will receive 100 times more than what you have left behind, and you will be given eternal life.” Then he adds a warning against greed and jealousy: “But many who now are first will be last, and many who now are last will be first.” And he gives a parable to illustrate his answer, a story about workers in a vineyard, all paid the same wage, no matter when they started working, and some said, “Not fair!”

I.

My husband Bill grew up in a family of 10. He says as a boy he would often go foraging in the family refrigerator looking for something to eat. He remembers once finding a leftover piece of pie. But about the time he took the pie from the refrigerator, one of his brothers came and said, “I want a piece of that.” But Bill replied, “No, I found it first; it belongs to me.”

Of course, his mother intervened; moms are that way, you know. She said, “Bill, cut that slice and share it with your brother.” So Bill took a knife and cut a little piece for his sibling and left a big piece for himself. But then his Mom said to his brother, “Now you choose first.” “Wait a minute,” Bill said, “if I had known you were going to do that, I would have divided it differently.” “Then you should have divided it differently,” she said.

Bill says it did not take long for him to learn to be careful how he divided something to make sure he did not get shorted. Because that’s our human nature, part of who we are. Left to our own design, our own ends, we probably will always try to get the bigger piece of pie. So when Jesus comes telling this story, it flies in the face of who we are and how we think.

Jesus tells this story in this way to teach that we have a generous, giving, gracious, God. And God’s grace supersedes any of our human ideas of what is equal or fair. I imagine that when Jesus told this story, the people looked at each other and said, “Do you think that really happened?” “Nobody would do that. A landowner

would be crazy to act that way. Nobody would be that generous.”

## II.

Jesus tells this story to get us thinking, “What does it mean that God’s grace is extended to the whole world?” And “What does it mean for us to be God’s graceful people in the world?” We tend to think God’s grace is for me and mine and no one else. If we are truthful, deep down we know God loves us but we are not so sure about those other folks. And we want to withhold this generosity and grace and reserve it for people like us.

But that is not who God is. When Matthew tells this story to his church, he is trying to help them see that the grace of God extends to a lot more folks than they think. Matthew’s church was mostly made up of Jewish Christians; Christianity had arisen as a sect of Judaism. And their idea was that this faith we call Christian was limited to those who were children of Abraham. Surely the grace of God did not extend to the Romans or those folks on the other side of the Jordan or those down in Africa or Egypt. Surely God’s grace was not meant for them.

So Matthew shares this story where Jesus is saying, “People are coming into the kingdom at different times and in different ways. Some of you have been in the kingdom your whole life. And some of you are just arriving. But God’s grace extends to all.

An ancient debate of the church was is it possible for someone to be saved between the stirrup and the ground? That is if a vile person who has lived an evil life is thrown from his horse, and he repents before he hits the ground, is he saved before he dies? Some in the church said yes; some said no. I like Fred Craddock’s answer best: “Well, yes, it is possible, but the problem is it does not leave much room for Christian education.”

Growing up in the faith, practicing the faith throughout our lives is important. But sometimes those of us who have had that privilege think that God’s grace is only for us. Those not like us are not really in; God really does love us a little more than those other folks. And Jesus is saying it is different in the kingdom of heaven.

## III.

In worship each week we pray a prayer called the Lord’s Prayer. In it we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” which means literally, “God, give us just what we need for today, no more, no less.” Then a sentence later we say, “Lead us not into temptation.” Those two petitions are connected, because in our needs, our temptation is to horde and be greedy.

Eighteen years ago, back in September of 1999, *People Magazine* ran an article about a man named Bob Thompson. Bob Thompson met his wife at Bowling Green University. They got married, then Bob went off to war. While he was gone, his wife was very careful with their money and saved up \$3500 dollars.

When Bob got home from the war, he started a little business. He had worked his way through college at an asphalt company and had learned the business. So he started an asphalt business in Michigan. Years later he sold that business for 420 million dollars. Pretty good return on \$3500 investment.

Then Bob did something that was unthinkable. He took 120 million of that and shared it with everyone who had ever worked for him, saying, "I would not have made this money if you had not helped me." So people who had worked with him received an enormous wealth. Unbelievable; unthinkable. He even searched and found people who had worked for him and then left the company. To each he said, "You helped me build my company, helped me get where I am; now I want to help you."

The writer of the article could not understand why he did this. He thought it was a crazy. So he asked, "Why are you doing this? Why are you being so generous?" Thompson said, "Isn't that what we are about?"

This week I asked Session members to share some stories about individuals in the congregation who had impressed them, through their faith and generosity. And they shared about an individual, who did not like having his name given, who at retirement gave all of his employees a substantial financial gift. He gave away hundreds of thousands of dollars, because that is what he was about. And I am guessing that there were folks who said "Is he crazy? Has he lost his mind?"

#### Conclusion:

That is the kind of outrageous story Jesus is telling here. And he tells it so we can understand the outrageous grace of God. And that by being graced, we are to share that grace with others. However, by whatever means we have received grace, it is not to be kept to ourselves; it is to be shared.

That is not easy, of course. We struggle with what it means to be like the landowner, like God, generous with everyone we meet, sharing to the point that people say, "Are you crazy? Are you out of your mind?"

But Jesus says grace abounds in the kingdom of heaven. And when grace is shared, it abounds more fully.

May God help us to be generous, gracious people. Amen.