

If you're like me, this parable of the laborers in the vineyard is hard to hear.
It just doesn't seem fair!

Steve Garnaas-Holmes who writes reflections on the weekly lectionary wrote this week:
"God's vision of justice is that everyone has what they need.

Manna in the wilderness, the widow's jar of meal, laborers in the vineyard, feeding the five thousand, God's forgiveness upon each heart: each is given what they need.
It is gift, that you can't earn or possess."¹

This morning's parable is about God's abundant grace.

It doesn't fit our perception of how the world works.

Jesus was seeking a new way of being in the world.

One where everyone human being was valued equally, where each receives what they need. God's grace is given to all equally, without having to be earned.

There is no competition in the sight of God. The parable envisions an alternative social order.² A social order where those who labor in the vineyard, regardless of when they are called, receive the same reward.

God doesn't have favorites!

Right before this passage Peter says to Jesus,

"Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matt 19:27)

Peter is reacting from his concept of worldly justice. Hey Jesus, we are the first ones to follow you, what's our reward?

And Jesus tells this parable.

Guess what Peter; you aren't any better than anyone else who will follow me.

As the Lord said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." (2Cor. 12:9)

God loves everyone no exceptions.

God provides for each as each has need.

We don't earn God's grace we only have to turn to God and seek God's forgiveness.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel the disciples had asked Jesus who was the greatest in the kingdom of God and Jesus called a child over to him and says to them (in *The Message* version) "*I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom. What's more, when you receive the childlike on my account, it's the same as receiving me.* (Matt 18:3-5)

In the parable this morning, the ones who worked all day complain "you have made them equal to us!" They are reacting from their concept of worldly justice, just as Peter does.

We seek to limit God's grace operating in the world when we act out of economic

¹ <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/john-newton-discovered-amazing-grace-11630253.html>

² *Feasting on the Word*, year A, Vol. 4, p. 95.

competition and what we consider societal norms. God doesn't act the way humanity does, thanks be to God! The person who comes to know Christ in a jail cell is offered the same amount of God's abundant grace in their life as the person who has lived their whole life respecting the dignity of other people. It is really hard for us to comprehend. God doesn't operate within our way of perceiving social order.

God's grace is offered to all but sometimes people have to be at the bottom and have lost all control over their lives before they seek God's grace in their lives.

John Newton was born in 1725 to a Puritan mother and a sea faring father. At age eleven John went to sea with his father and was later impressed into the British Navy. He eventually became the captain of his own ship, *The Grayhound*, which carried slaves from Africa to the States. John Newton was a slave trader.

As a child his Puritan mother had read him the scriptures and prayed that he would become a minister, but as an adult he had early on rejected Christianity.

On March 21, 1748, when he was 23, Newton's ship was caught in a violent storm in the north Atlantic. He tied himself to the helm to steer the ship as the ship was being torn apart by the waves. Though he never read the Bible, his mother's reading of Proverbs 1:24-31 came to his mind as he faced his own death on the sea. God says,

“Since you laugh at my counsel and make a joke of my advice, how can I take you seriously? I'll turn the tables and joke about *your* troubles!
What if the roof falls in, and your whole life goes to pieces? What if catastrophe strikes and there's nothing to show for your life but rubble and ashes?
You'll need me then. You'll call for me, but don't expect an answer.
No matter how hard you look, you won't find me.
“Because you hated Knowledge and had nothing to do with the Fear-of-GOD,
Because you wouldn't take my advice and brushed aside all my offers to train you,
Well, you've made your bed—now lie in it; you wanted your own way—now, how do you like it? (*The Message*, version)

His ship was miraculously saved when the cargo shifted to cover a hole in the side of the ship. Shortly after this experience he began to read the Bible and study the scriptures. And he began to pray on a regular basis. God's grace was working within John Newton. He soon left the slave trade and took a job as a tide surveyor in Liverpool. God's grace continued to work within John Newton. In 1764 at age 39 he was ordained as an Anglican priest. He spent the next 43 years of his life preaching and practicing the gospel. After he was ordained he moved with his wife, Mary, to a parish in Olney. God's grace continued to work within John Newton. He composed hymns for his Sunday evening worship service. One of those hymns “Faith's Review & Expectations” became known as *Amazing Grace*. He also wrote *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoke* for those services.

In 1779 Newton moved to St Mary Woolnoth in London where he met William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament, who was working to end slavery in England.

Wilberforce was influenced by John Newton's preaching and teaching on the gospels. God's grace continued to work within John Newton. John Newton had become a leading figure in the efforts to eradicate slavery in all of England. He remained active in ministry until age 80 when illness began to take its toll on him. God's grace continued to work within John Newton. He died in 1807 proclaiming to the end how much God's grace had done for him while working for social change and justice in England.

"Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."³ John Newton was a lost soul, someone who did unspeakable harm to others. But when in his fear, he opened himself to God's grace, God began to work within him and through the following years worked through John Newton to end slavery in England.

God did the same with a Pharisee walking the road to Damascus who was arresting those who believed in Christ. Saul became Paul through his encounter with God's grace on the road to Damascus and God worked through him to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ and form faith communities who would continue to spread the gospel throughout the world.

God does not see the world the way we perceive the world. It is only when we open ourselves to God's grace and rely on our Creator to supply our needs that God can work through us to change the world. God's ways are not our ways, thanks be to God!

³ Amazing Grace, Hymnal 1982, #671.