

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 18, 2005

Sermon Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Now, I have struggled with the sermon this week, as I have not for years. I've spent perhaps, and literally, about 20 hours working to make this short parable into something that touches us, today, in our faith at Main Street. I hope that if I have put 20 hours into it, you can give me 20 minutes to stay with me. Follow me to the end. It may touch us all.

Now, this is a story, first of all, about pickup labor. Now, I've been pickup labor, day labor. One summer, when I was 14, I lived away from home at a friend's house, Mark McDonald, in Mauldin, SC, and here's how it worked. We would get up very early, and we would put on our worn out blue jeans and t-shirts and boots, and we would go down to a particular corner, and we would wait. We would wait to see if the crew chief wanted us that day, and sometimes he would pick us up, and sometimes not. You know, it was not just every day that they needed our highly specialized skills – hole digging and rock removal. You know, I bet with a refresher course, I could still do that! We worked 10-hour summer days, physical labor for \$1.65 an hour, before taxes. Now, you better believe, my 14-year-old self would have resented someone coming in an hour before quitting time, and getting a full day's pay, and that is because our minds and our experience in this world, we think fairness. God thinks grace.

This same message is throughout scripture, and we don't like it! We want to earn it! We don't want God to give it away to people, whom have done less than we think we have done. Now, I need to back up a chapter, and get a running start at Jesus' message here. Now, I know when I back up and do a little Bible study from the pulpit, your eyes glaze over, and you think, “That has nothing to do with me and my life,” and you zone out. You could not be more wrong. Hang with me.

Back in Matthew 19, a rich young man runs up to Jesus, and says, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Now, that's worldly thinking again. What's the least I can do to get eternal life, and I do mean the very least. What good deed is good enough to get me in with God? What good deed would be good enough to get me in with God? You know what Jesus said to that man, “For you, it would mean selling all you own, and giving it to the poor.” Jesus said that because our faith allows only one God. That rich young ruler already had his god – Money! For him, for him to gain eternal life would mean to forsake his god of money so he would be free to follow God as God. Now, that man walked away, head down, sorrowful because he was rich, and I guess it seemed to him that, well, worldly wise, his money did for him what he wanted his money to do, and he was not so sure he could trust God to get him what he wanted. He trusted his money more. He had his god. Now, picture this, a little bit unexpected, right after that rich man walked away, it got Peter's attention. Peter perked up, and said, “Now, Jesus, now, Jesus, we disciples have already given up everything to follow you!” Now, here we go again, Peter thinking from the term of fairness, and God from the point of view of grace. Peter is saying now, “What do we get? We've already given up everything!” Jesus' reaction seems to be, “What do you get? What do you get? All right, let me tell you a story.” That's when Jesus told the disciples this story.

An owner needed workers for his field. In Matthew, the field is the world, the owner is God, and the workers are those who respond and say yes. The owner offered the pickup labor, standing on

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 18, 2005

the corner in the marketplace at 6:00 a.m., a denarius for the day. That’s a fair wage. That was enough for daily bread, enough to support a family. That was a day’s wage. Then he went back out at 9:00, and back out at 12:00, and back out at 3:00, and back out at 5:00, and quitting time is 6:00. Common wisdom is that, if someone didn’t bother to come to the day labor corner until later on, he might be undesirable. He might be lazy. He might be hung over, but that’s part of the point of this story. This landowner hires everyone in sight. Six and nine and twelve and three and five, if they show up, and offer themselves, they get sent into the field. That, too, is grace. Sometimes we love the idea of grace. Here is what I struggle with. Sometimes we love the idea of grace. Don’t we love the grace of the waiting father, the waiting father looking down the road in the prodigal son story? We love grace in that story. We humans are so fickle! We have such short memories! In the prodigal son story, we rejoice at God’s grace, forgiving his wild son, and we are ashamed at the anger of the stay-at-home good son, who refuses to go into the party for his lost and found brother. We rejoice in the grace, and we are ashamed of the resentful brother. Here in this story, the Johnny come lately workers get the whole day’s pay, and that is grace, and we hate it! It’s not fair! The stay-all-day workers think they should get more, and we agree. They worked in the heat of the day! They should get more.

Now, do we approve of God’s grace for the last minute and the lost and found, or do we not? Does God owe the stay-at-home obedient son and the all day workers more reward or not? We need to make up our minds. We need to get straight about grace and rewards and about how foolish it would be to demand from God, fairness. Have mercy, yes, have mercy! I do not want fairness from a Holy, righteous judge, who knows every thought of my heart and every secret sin, large and small, confessed and unconfessed. I do not want fairness; I do not want justice from God. Lord, I want mercy! Lord, I want grace! Lord, for the sake of Jesus Christ and his cross, forgive me! Give me new eyes and new life and receive me into eternal life by your son’s merit, for in myself, even my best works are tainted by self, tainted by sin. I know it, and God knows it, and I want mercy. To be scriptural about it, Jesus says, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” Then Jesus tells this parable about the workers you just heard, and then he says the same thing again in case you didn’t get the point. He ends with the same phrase turned around so the last will be first and the first will be last. Look and see, 19:30 and then 20:16. He framed this parable with that statement twice. God is promising to turn upside down what we believe the rules to be. When it was time to be paid, the one hours got a full day’s pay, and nobody complained at first. They thought amazing generosity, and the same happened with the half day and the three-quarter day and so on, and don’t you know that the 12 hour workers were saying to themselves, “Oh boy, oh boy, this is the most generous man I have ever worked for. If those lazy so and sos get a full day’s pay, think what we are going to get!” Well, what they got was the same. No more, no less. This is about the kingdom of Heaven Jesus says. Come early, come late, the pay is the same, and that is not because of the work you do, that is because of the grace of God. I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me, or do you begrudge my generosity? That is the question. Do we begrudge God’s generosity? Does my grace to others anger you? Does my love of others anger you? Does my forgiveness of others upset you? Does it? Sometimes it does. Have you ever doubted or sneered at or felt some sort of cosmic injustice when a criminal type comes to God just before execution? We may say, “No way.” We may say, “God could not forgive that!” But I ask, would you give sin, would you give any sin, more power than the grace of God to cover it? Is the blood of Christ too weak to work for latecomers? Would it take two

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 18, 2005

crosses? Would it take two atoning deaths? Would it take two Christs for their sins? No, one is enough. One savior is all anyone needs.

Now, please catch this point. Cheap grace, the kind that we presume upon, the indulgent kind that our grandmothers probably gave us, the kind that demands no response at all, is not taught here. Some responded early to the call, those workers in the field; some responded late, but one thing that they all did was respond. No part of the story speaks of workers, who stayed in bed or heard and said, “No way, I’m not going into the field,” and then lined up later to be paid. If Jesus wanted to teach no response, this would be a great place to do it. He did not. We must respond to the call sometime. That always involves doing something. God is looking for a response. It may be small. It may be giving up a lunch of a few fish and a few loaves with 5,000 hungry people, but God wants us to give him something to work with. Along the principle of doing, I remember Jesus’ words, “Not everyone who says with their mouth, who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father, who is in Heaven.” Doing, responding, reacting to God’s offer is required, however small, however. This scripture argues for the reality of the possibility of death bed conversions and last minute pardons from our graceful God, but it argues against listening your whole life and never once saying yes to God, and then lining up for a reward. Ephesians in the second chapter says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith.” This is not your own doing. It is the gift of God. Not because of works, lest many should boast. There are works, but works come as a natural response of faith. They are not a substitute for faith, for saying yes to God. God wants faith. God wants trust. God wants us, our hearts, our minds, and our souls. Of course, God is overgenerous in giving abundant life and overgenerous in giving eternal life. From Abraham on down, faith is what God rewards. Faith changes us. Faith opens our eyes to the world as God sees it and the needs and the worth of others from God’s point of view. Faith changes us toward connectedness and compassion. Before faith, we’re like a pirate.

My wife, Caroline, watches these old movies, this old movie channel. I’ve tried to block it time after time after time, but she finds a way to get through again, these old movies. I walked in one day. Faith is sort of like this old movie. I saw a pilot, and he was passed out in an airplane in the scene, as I walked through, and it caught my eye. I saw the pilot was unconscious, and he was soaring toward the ground, and in the movie, at the very last minute, he wakes up, and he changes direction, and he soars skyward to safety. Jesus’ call, whether it’s soon or late, is a wake up call. Wake up before it’s too late! I always remember the thief on the cross next to Jesus. There were two, but one woke up at the last minute, he woke up to whom Jesus was and to whom he was as a sinner, and Jesus said, “Today, you will see me in paradise.” He understood his sins, and Jesus, with the authority of God to forgive, and who else but God can forgive, Jesus did forgive, and that was that. You can disagree with the possibility of deathbed conversions, but you will have to rip that page out of your Bible because there it is. Such is God’s power and determination to gather us. That thief was a last minute worker. He knew Jesus was God in flesh, and he woke up. He came to himself. He came to himself. And it’s very odd because those are the same words in the prodigal son story! The prodigal came to himself, and he knew that grace and forgiveness were the heart of his father. In our day workers story today, all through the day, the master came, taking anybody who would answer his call to work in the field. Same wages for all. The sinner, prodigal, made it in. The thief made it in. The last minute worker made it in. God is judge, and if God chooses to forgive, we do not get to

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

September 18, 2005

reopen the case. There is no appeal against God’s grace for others. God’s forgiveness is not under our review. There is a chilling implication in Jesus’ debate with the Pharisees and all these similar stories. The unsaid implication is that the only people who may fall are those who think they can stand before God on their own merit. It is implied, and we could argue this, but it is implied in these stories and in his arguments with the Pharisees that the only people who may fall are those who believe they can stand before God on their own merits. Living with God means forgiving and giving up your bitterness and your judgment and your right to resent others. Living for God and working for God means harvesting and waking up others to the fact of the good news of the Gospel. God is not fair; thank God, God is forgiving. God is graceful. God is trustworthy. God wants you to go into his field, which is the world, and wake up others to God’s loving and forgiving nature, but sometimes, to our own shame, we resent God’s grace. What a foolish thing, to resent the very attribute of God, the very attribute of God, which gives us a chance, a second chance, a real life, and life eternal. How foolish to resent the latecomers that they might receive the same grace, which enables us to stand. God’s free grace is our hope, and if you feel God owes you or owes you more than others, then you are wrong. If you resent God’s grace and forgiveness to others then you are wrong. If you think God loves you more than some last minute convert, just before he dies, then you are wrong. So says this parable. God is not fair. God is God. All that we get is grace. We never want to pray, “Give me what I deserve.” What, indeed, do I deserve? What do I deserve? If God is just and fair, and God sets the standards, and they are for real, and we have free will, and we ignore God, and we ignore others, what do we deserve? I’ll take grace. I’ll take grace.

There is a story I want to tell from memory, and I hope I tell it properly. It is a story from my wife’s childhood. She went to a family reunion yesterday in a little town called Sharon. It’s near York. If you know where it is, I’m amazed. Probably no one here has been to Sharon. It’s a tiny little town. Her grandmother, she called BopBop, lived up on the hill, and there was a store at the bottom of the hill run by a friend of the family. When she was a little bitty girl, she would take, and her other little girl cousins, and I think it was all girl cousins, and they would go as a little girl gang of five- and six-year-olds, and they would take a penny or a nickel or a dime, whatever they had, and they would go through the store, and pick up all the candy and all the gum and all the kid things in the store. They would put it on the counter, and they would lay up their penny, and the storekeeper, who was a friend of the family, would say, “Thank you very much.” They would take their big bag full of candy back up to BopBop’s house. She said she was always amazed, way into her teen years, how much six cents would buy in Sharon! Later, she realized that her little penny meant nothing, her little nickel meant nothing, that her BopBop was paying the bill. The point of this story is that our good works, even our best works, even if it’s our entire lifetime, even in the heat of the day, even in difficult times, means nothing. God is paying the bill. The bill has been paid in God in flesh in Christ on the cross. Our works are a response to that great gift of grace, but we do not earn life eternal. God has given us life eternal. Respond early, respond late. It is all grace, and that is the point of this story, God’s amazing grace. Amen.