

## That Amazing, Aggravating Grace!

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(Preached at Fort Des Moines UMC 9-18-11)

Jesus was a story teller. He wanted people to know what the kingdom of heaven is like. So he told them stories, hoping to catch their attention, hoping that they would understand. He used familiar scenes as settings for his stories, everyday events and happenings that people could relate to. So when he began a story, people began to listen. And they heard about people like themselves, doing things like they had done. But sometimes, just when they thought the story was going to be nice and predictable, something surprising would happen. Something that left them to think and to wonder about what it all meant.

Jesus told his stories in such a way that the hearers could imagine what it would be like to be a character in the story. They could see and hear the sights and sounds, and feel the emotions. The characters came alive, and the listeners knew just how the characters must have felt. Like the workers who worked all day in the vineyard. They were so real, that one of them might step right out of the story and speak to them, might begin to tell *his* side of the story. And if he did, he might say something like this:

I went to the marketplace early that morning to look for work. I always went early. I prided myself on being a hard worker, on putting in a full day's work so that I would earn a full day's wage. Often there was not enough work for all those who wanted it and those who arrived later in the day either weren't hired, or only earned wages for a few hours. I had a family to support, so I made sure I was there before the landowners arrived to hire those they would need for the day.

Shortly after I arrived at the marketplace and joined the other laborers who were looking for work that day, a landowner came to hire workers for his vineyard. I was among those he hired. He agreed to pay us the usual daily wage, and then sent us into his vineyard to work. It was a hot day, and we worked hard. After we had worked for a few hours there were more that joined us in the vineyard. And a few hours later still more workers came. It went on that way all day, with the last group of new workers coming to the vineyard only one hour before quitting time.

Then it was quitting time, and we were called to receive our wages. At first I couldn't help but feel a little envious of those who had been hired late. *They* didn't look hot and tired and dirty like those of us who had worked all day. Yet I knew that when I had received my wages I would be glad that I had worked all day. I thought about how I would feel returning home and having to face my family with only an hour's wages in my hand. A family couldn't live on that. No, I thought, those who only worked an hour weren't to be envied.

Then the manager began to pay us, beginning with the group who had been hired last. We watched as one by one they stepped up and received the full daily wage! At first I thought that the manager must be mixed up, that he must have thought he was starting with those of us who had worked all day. But then I realized that he knew what he was doing, and he actually meant to pay them the full daily wage, even though they had only worked one hour. My goodness that was generous!! Then I began to wonder, 'if he is going to pay a full day's wage to those who have only worked an hour, how much is he going to give those of us who worked all day?' I began to imagine how excited my family would be when I came home with all that extra money.

I watched as the manager continued on paying the other groups, the ones that had started mid-afternoon and noon and mid-morning. And he paid them all one full day's wage. It didn't make sense! If those who only worked one hour deserved a full day's wage, didn't those who worked half a day deserve more? Then he began paying my group. The ones of us who had worked all day. And it began to sink in that we were only going to get the regular daily wage too. Well, let me tell you, we were pretty upset! How on earth could he justify paying us all the same? We had worked *all* day!!! How could we be worth the same as those who had only worked one hour??

I was angry, and so I complained. And the landowner said to me, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to the last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Well, what could I say? He was right. I hadn't been cheated. He had paid me what I had agreed to when he hired me. And so I took my wages and left.

Still, it just didn't seem right. Even with a full day's wage in my hand, I *felt* as though I had been cheated. And all the way home I mulled it over in my mind, trying to make sense of what had happened and how I felt. I had been paid what I had agreed to. Exactly what, all day long as I worked, I was expecting to be paid. If I hadn't seen what those other workers were paid, I would be perfectly satisfied with my wage. But I had seen, and it made me angry, because somehow it just wasn't fair!! I had worked all day in the hot sun, and they had worked only one hour. How could that be worth the same? How could it be fair to pay us the same when I had worked so much longer?

I thought again of the landowner's words. I had to admit that he was right. He had paid me what we had agreed to. He hadn't cheated me, I had no cause to complain. And surely he did have the right to do what he chose with what belonged to him. Who was I to be angry and envious of his generosity? Still .....it just didn't seem right.

Or perhaps one of those workers who started late in the day might tell his side of the story:

I didn't get to the marketplace early that day. I usually did, because even the wage I could earn by working all day was barely enough to keep my family clothed and fed. I certainly couldn't afford to earn less than that. But my mother had been very ill, and I was afraid to leave her that morning. Finally by late in the day she seemed to improve a little, and I felt that it would be OK to go. There was so little of the day left that it hardly seemed worth going to the marketplace at all. Surely no one would be hiring workers now, and even if they were, the wage for such a short time would hardly be worth it. But any little bit would help, so I decided to go on the chance that there would still be someone looking for workers even that late in the day.

I arrived at the marketplace and discovered that there were others still waiting for work, too. I waited with them for quite awhile. I was just about to give up and go back home when a landowner arrived, looking for more workers for his vineyard. He agreed to hire us all. He said that he would pay us what was fair. That sounded a little vague, but anything was better than nothing, so I went with him to his vineyard. We had only worked about an hour when we were told it was time to quit and receive our wages. The manager started with our group first, even though we had been hired last. When I stepped up to receive my pay, he handed me a full day's wage. I started to correct him, to let him know that I was one of those who had only worked an hour. But he just nodded and told me that was the pay I was to receive. I was amazed! Never had I experienced such generosity.

I was curious to see what others who had worked longer would be paid. Surely if I had received a day's wage for an hour's work, they would receive more. But the manager continued paying each group of workers the same. They all received one day's wage, regardless of how long they had worked. The last group to be paid were those who had been hired first. They had worked since early that morning, and I could tell they were hot and tired. And they were not happy when they realized that they were being paid the same as I had been. I couldn't blame them, it must not have seemed very fair to them. They complained, but the landowner just told them that he paid them what they had agreed to. Then he asked them if he didn't have a right to do whatever he wanted to with what was his.

I don't think any of them were terribly satisfied with that. They knew that he was right, and there was no use arguing with him, but you could tell that they were angry just the same. I couldn't help feeling sorry for them. I knew I would feel the same if I were in their place. Yet their anger and disappointment couldn't spoil my excitement. I went home with a full day's wage in my hand, feeling on top of the world. To have received so much when I deserved so little was exhilarating yet humbling at the same time. I couldn't wait to share the good news with my family. They would be so excited. Maybe it would even make my mother smile again.

Yes, Jesus' stories were so real that it wasn't hard to imagine the feelings of those he talked about. It wasn't hard for the listeners to put themselves into the story. Yet in the end, Jesus' stories must have left them wondering just what he meant by telling that story. It left them to question and think, exactly as Jesus intended. And now we, far away and many years removed, are the listeners of those stories. Our life situations are not the same, so maybe we can never enter into those stories in quite the same way as those first listeners did. But Jesus' stories transcend time and place because they are, at heart, about issues and feelings that are as real and relevant now as they were when Jesus spoke the words himself. And so even if we have never been a laborer in a vineyard, we know how they felt. And the story raises for us the same questions that it must have for those first listeners.

How is the kingdom of heaven like that landowner? We have come to believe that Jesus meant that God is like that landowner. That God will show the same grace to those who come to him late as he does to those who have "worked all day in the hot sun". Jesus may have told that story to help those who felt like they had labored long and hard for God and so deserved special privileges, to see that in God's eyes, those who came to God late were equal to them. People like the Scribes and Pharisees who resented Jesus acting like sinners and tax collectors were worthy of his time and attention. The message was that in God's eyes, all who come to him are equal, and all receive God's grace equally.

The challenge is, how do we humans deal with that kind of grace? It sounds nice and generous if we are those who only worked for an hour, but if we're those who worked hard all day, it just doesn't seem fair! I think most of us in the church identify with the workers who have worked all day. Many of us have been life-long Christians, and although we say we believe that we are saved by the grace of God and not our good works, I suspect that there is still a part of us that takes pride in how hard we work for God. And there may even be a part of us that feels like we ought to be worth more to God than some others are because of our faithfulness and hard work.

In theory we believe in the free grace of God, offered equally to all. But when we stop to think of what that actually means, it may not seem quite fair to us. What if that guy down the street or in the next town who spends his life not giving a hoot about God and generally being a jerk to everyone, suddenly calls on God on his death bed? If we believe in a gracious, loving God, if we believe God is who Jesus proclaimed him to be, then we have to believe that that guy is accepted and loved by God every bit as much as we are, and that by God's grace he is made equal to us in the eyes of God. We know we *ought* to say "Praise God! How Wonderful for him!" But we may *want* to say, "That Guy? Equal to me? But I've worked so hard, I've believed so long? That isn't fair!"

If we expect God to be fair, at least by our standards of fairness, then we will be disappointed. Because God's grace isn't fair, it's fantastic! It reaches to people we would just as soon write off as unreachable, and as hard as it may be for us to accept, it makes them equal to us in God's eyes. That is what grace is all about. Grace is never deserved. As hard as we might work, we will never deserve the gift of God's grace. And yet God offers it to us freely. That is what is amazing about God's grace.

But grace is not a commodity that is ours to control. And we do not write the rules for how it is to be given. And that is what is aggravating about grace. It is *God's* gift to freely give, and God chooses to give it to people that we may think are unworthy. Well of course they are. But - so are we. So are all of us. But God loves us anyway. Loves us enough to offer us his amazing grace. Thanks be to God! Amen