

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for September 20, 2020

GRACE GREATER THAN OUR SIN

Matthew 20:1-16

On the news was a story about an African-American man whose house had been newly painted. Within days, someone had spray-painted graffiti all over it. Who would have done something like this in his neighborhood, he wondered? He was angry, and rightly so. At first, he thought it was racially motivated. Someone did not like him living in their neighborhood. He asked around hoping to find the culprit. He discovered the graffiti was painted by an eleven-year-old boy. It was nothing more than a childhood prank.

What would you do if you discovered your newly –painted house covered with graffiti? Suppose the culprit was an eleven-year-old boy? Would the police be called? Would you at least want to talk to the boy’s parents? Would there be a lawsuit—after all, somebody would have to pay for the damage? What would you do in that situation?

The man who was wronged could have made a big issue out of it. Instead, he decided to get to know the boy better. He was unsure what would happen, but was willing to try. Thus, a black man and a young white boy soon became friends. Instead of taking the boy and his parents to court, he decided to teach the boy about computers. The news showed the young boy at the computer in the man’s house he had earlier spray-painted. The reporter asked him about the graffiti. The boy told the reporter he was sorry for what he had done. He did not know why he had done it. “Mr. Stephens and I are friends now,” he told the reporter. “He has taught me computers.”

That’s something of a surprise ending, isn’t it? You might have expected to see the young boy scrubbing the graffiti off the man’s house, or giving he house a new coat of paint. You might have expected his parents to ground him for a month. But you would have never expected to see him in the man’s den working on his computer.

Jesus often told parables with a surprise ending. One example is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. It was about this time of year, late September, when grapes would be ripe in Palestine. It was a race against time. The grapes would

have to be harvested before the October rains. Every available person would be employed a day, or two, to help. Very early in the morning, the owner of the vineyard went to the marketplace to find able-bodied workers. He promised to pay well for their efforts.

After a couple of hours, the landowner realized he needed more workers. Time was running out. He returned to the marketplace and found some other men “standing idle.” He offered them employment, and they gladly accepted. “I will pay you whatever is right,” he told them. So they went to work. Later, he realized he needed still more workers, so at noon, and at three o’clock, he hired still more. He still wasn’t going to make it. Even with all these additional workers all the grapes would not be harvested. At five o’clock, with only one hour left to work, he went once again to the marketplace.

The trouble began at quitting time. The workers hired at five o’clock and worked for only one hour in the cool off the evening, were paid one silver coin. The workers who had worked all day in the hot sun looked on in amazement. They began to think if these workers, who had worked only one hour, got that much, then certainly they would receive more—after all they worked all day. They were in for a disappointment. In fact, they were outraged—for they received the same amount as those who worked only one hour, one silver coin. How dare the landowner pay them the same amount as those who had worked all day. It wasn’t fair. They felt cheated.

Of course, this parable isn’t about harvesting grapes at all. It’s about grace. AND IT SAYS TO US LOUDLY, AND CLEARLY, THAT GRACE CANNOT BE EARNED. The workers in the vineyard expressed their outrage to the owner of the vineyard. “These last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day, and the scorching heat.” Their reaction took the landowner by surprise.

“Friend,” the landowner replied to one of the disgruntled workers, “I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree for the usual daily wage?” It was true, of course. They were paid what was promised. The landowner did not cheat them in any way. Then he asked an interesting question, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” Here is an important lesson about the grace of

God. God's grace is a gift. Whether we have been in the family of God for a long time, or are a recent arrival, the benefits of faith are the same. God is generous.

Ellsworth Kalas tells about a sun swept October afternoon in 1932 when he came bounding home from school, eager to tear off school clothes, and put on playground stuff. But to his great surprise, he discovered his father was home. That was unthinkable. It was 3:30 in the afternoon. "Why are you home, Dad?" young Ellsworth asked. His father was generally slow to speak but especially so now. His mother quickly replied, "Daddy's lost his job."

Until then, Ellsworth did not know anyone who was unemployed. "I didn't know good people could be unemployed," he admits. "I thought only lazy people were without jobs, people who wouldn't apply themselves, or who didn't deserve a job." Young Ellsworth's attitude changed considerably in the next eight or nine years when more, and more from his neighborhood, found themselves unemployed.

It is amazing how quick we are to judge other people's situations. The Bible teaches us that only God is qualified to judge. He sees the heart. He knows the inner person. And when God renders His verdict, "Forgiven!" it is total and absolute. God's grace is equally poured out on us all, whether we've worked twelve hours in the heat of the day, or whether we've worked only one hour, in the cool of the evening.

But here is the good news for the day. You and I have a great opportunity. WE CAN BE AGENTS OF GRACE ON GOD'S BEHELF. Place yourself for a moment not with the workers in the vineyard. Rather, see yourself as one chosen to dispense the silver coins. Can't you see the eyes of those first workers as they receive a silver coin for only one hour's work. Wouldn't you like to bring that kind of joy into someone's life?

Linda Malone tells about a transformation that occurred in her life. She was one of the million homeless people living in the streets and under bridges in the cities across our country. Linda uses words like "confused, lost, and dead" to describe those days before she found Christ. Actually, Linda will tell you that Christ found her.

A couple in a local church, Tom and Claudia, wanted to help a needy family. Through a social agency, they were given Linda's name. At the time they met Linda, she had two young children, with a third on the way. Her husband, an addict, had deserted her. She had no place to live. Tom and Claudia quickly realized they couldn't help Linda and her children all by themselves. They enlisted the help of other couples in their Sunday school class. They helped Linda and her children find a place to live. They helped her find a job. Tom and Claudia kept the two children for a week while the third was being born. Other people in the church took turns caring for the children, providing food and clothing. They supported and helped Linda in many ways.

One Sunday morning a year or so later, Linda stood up in church to give her witness. She told the congregation she had been sober for six months. She now had a job, and was able to be a responsible mother to her children. She was no longer worried about living on the streets, spending time in jail, or having her children taken away from her. Linda not only used words like confused, homeless, lost and dead, but as a result of her new life, she used words like joy, love, direction, coming home, life, and saved by Jesus Christ.

Linda and her children now attend worship almost every Sunday. Tom and Claudia and other members of her Sunday school class sit nearby. After worship, Linda teaches a three-year-old Sunday school class. She is there every Sunday, and the children love her. "If you know anyone who doubts that Jesus is alive," Linda says, "let them talk to me."

Undoubtedly, there were some in Linda's church who complained about all the attention Linda and her children were receiving. That happens. Thank God for the others, though—Tom and Claudia, and other members who knew they were recipients of God's grace, and passed that grace on to Linda and her children. None of us deserves God's grace; it is freely given. But we can be partners with God in bringing that grace to others.

AMEN!