

GRACE AND ENTITLEMENT<sup>1</sup>  
Matthew 20: 1-6  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
September 21, 2008

Seven years ago at this very time we were more united than ever. All the old culture war divisions were discarded in the horror of 9/11. Now they are back with a vengeance, and we are all losers for it.

In all the complacencies, complicities, and complexities of the current economic crisis, we may not understand all the issues, but we can clearly see how divided we are. Nostalgic values of small-town America are pitted against urban sophistication and a distrust of diversity. Scholarly expertise is pitted against down-home country experience. Partisan rhetoric is pitted against media talking heads. Rancor is palpable as we move closer to Election Day, and the old divisions of male versus female, young versus old, black versus white, rich versus poor, and left versus right, are more prominent than ever.

We gather in church weary from the conflict to ask: can the wisdom of ancient scripture speak to a time such as this? Can stories such as those we read today be pertinent to our present crisis?

I

When we read the story Jesus told about the laborers going out to the vineyard to work, we are glimpsing a raging culture war! Reading between the

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lines, we can see that the writer of the gospel of Matthew was dealing with his own culture war: a sharply divided church. On the one hand, there were those who had a strong Jewish background and had become Christians at the synagogue after hearing the story of Jesus. They had been blessed with all the gifts of the Jewish faith. They knew the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. The men had been circumcised, and both women and men had benefited from the idea that they were part of God's chosen people. They felt privileged. They were the right wing in the church.

On the other hand, there were newcomers to the church. They were Gentiles, people who had never really had the benefits of a lifelong study of the Hebrew stories, who never went through the rituals of circumcision or a bat mitzvah or a mikva. There was no conception for them of being part of God's chosen people. They were new to all of this. Now they were invited into the church as full members, just as much a part of God's people as those who had been through a standard Jewish childhood and learned all the stories. They were the left wing of the church.

We can hardly imagine how these two groups melded into one. A great deal of the letters written by early church leaders has to do with the dilemma of how to mesh the Jewish members with the non-Jewish, how to create one people of God out of two groups who before had despised one another. In other words, this story is about how to resolve an early culture war!

It is in that context that I think this parable was used. The late-comers to the congregation, the Gentiles, were fully members of the church and deserved the same recognition as the Jewish members of the church. Those who had been working from the very beginning to establish the church in a hostile environment; those who gave generously all those years to keep the church afloat; those who sacrificed their time and efforts, taught the scriptures, led the worship, visited the sick, supported the poor, washed the dishes, cleaned the floors, served communion, took out the garbage, passed the plates, paid the bills, sang in the choir, filled out the annual report forms, and locked the doors when everyone had left— these people thought they deserved more than those upstart Gentiles who just came into the church!

That, I think, is the way this story was used in the early church. And, I suppose, it has its relevance for today, although we are more apt to welcome newcomers into the church with open arms and give them more responsibility that they are quite prepared for. So instead of wringing this text tighter to get a few more drops of meaning out of it, let's step back and look at this parable alongside the story we read from the Old Testament today.

## II

It doesn't always happen, but this week the Old Testament story is a direct parallel with the New Testament story. They are saying virtually the same thing. The story of Jonah is a kind of parable that speaks about entitlement and grace.

Jonah was happy to receive grace from God for himself. He thought he was entitled. But he wanted not grace but justice from God for the city of Nineveh. He pleaded for mercy for himself, but pleaded for destruction for Nineveh.

When Jonah found himself in an impossible situation, symbolized by his sinking in the stormy water and being swallowed up by a great sea monster<sup>1</sup> (Incidentally, why do we ever get uptight over whether or not this is literal? Haven't you ever felt like Jonah? Haven't you ever felt swallowed up by developments beyond your control?)<sup>1</sup> But as I was saying, when Jonah found himself sinking and sliding down the gullet of a great sea monster, the scripture has him calling out, *I called to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice....The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains....yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you.... Deliverance belongs to the Lord!*<sup>2</sup>

The truth is, Jonah didn't deserve such deliverance. He had been a jerk, and he proceeded to continue being a jerk. Jonah embraced the idea of an all-right and an all-wrong world. There were no gray areas for him. He was all right; Nineveh was all wrong. He went to the city of Nineveh and announced its impending destruction with glee. Then he waited outside the city limits to watch the show. But

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<sup>2</sup> Jonah 2: 1-9.

the destruction of Nineveh didn't take place because the city repented, from the king down to the poorest citizen, they all repented. And they received divine mercy. There's nothing that can make some religious people madder than the mercy of God! God seems to like people that some highly religious folk can't seem to stand! In other words, we are talking about a welcoming and affirming God!

### III

So we have before us two stories that end in the same way: Jonah is peeved over God's mercy toward the people of Nineveh, and the full-time workers are peeved over the equal treatment of the part-time workers. And the truth is that we are secretly sympathetic with their anger. Both stories assault our sense of fairness! We may never understand God's logic, but we can understand some things.

Like this: whether you enter the life of faith sooner or later, whether you serve God from the first flush of youth into the strength of your midday and finally when the shadows of life are lengthening; or, if you enter the life of faith as your day is dying in the west, you are equally precious to God.

And to carry this one step further, there are those who die full of years, when their work is done and they have finished their course. They are surrounded by children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, honored for the heritage they leave. But then there are those young people who are taken away from us long before their journey is ended, long before they have achieved their potential, long before we are ready even to consider the possibility of their death. And from this

parable we get the assurance that both are equally welcomed by the divine. We learn something about the welcome of God.

But there is more: we learn something about the compassion of God. There is a tenderness to these stories. I don't know a better word to use: tenderness. Jonah the jerk, squawking out to God and God reaches out and brings his life up from the Pit, as the text says. There is hardly a better word to use: the Pit. Some speak of life as the Pits, but God brings us up out of the Pits! And the owner of the vineyard keeps coming back to the town square to find more workers because he can't stand to see people out of work. There is a compassion here for those out of work. We may not have an easy answer to the rising level of unemployment in this country, but we can still advocate for good jobs at fair wages. We can vote for humane policies that show compassion and not condemnation for those out of work.

And there is one more thing: these stories picture an extraordinarily generous God. It is pure grace that saved Jonah and it is pure grace that pays the workers a full day's wage. Nothing but grace! The bottom line is that the life God gives us is not just pay but a gift—nothing but grace!

#### IV

In every other vineyard in this world, what really counts are political connections and status and degrees and titles and seniority. We strive to be President, Chairperson, Executive Director, Supervisor, Dean, doctor, tenured

professor, the Reverend, whatever! But all of those titles are irrelevant in this life of faith.

When you enter this world of faith in Christ, you enter a community of brothers and sisters, founded to help heal the wounds caused by the culture wars, the conceit of birthright, the arrogance of racial privilege, the disparities of opportunity rooted in gender, the irrational hatred of those with minority sexual orientation, the exclusion of those of different theological positions<sup>3</sup> in fact, all of our pathetic definitions of success reflected in status, income, residence or even luck! These distinctions dissolve in the love and mercy of God found in Jesus Christ!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See James W. Crawford, *Minister's Manuel* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 19.