

Scripture:

Psalm 75

Matthew 20:1-16

“How can it be?”

As one commentator said about our passage for today --- “Sometimes the most memorable things in life are things that rub us the wrong way.”

“Sometimes the most memorable things in life are things that rub us the wrong way.”

Very often the person who cuts us off in traffic is far more memorable than the one who waves us on.

It’s often unfortunate that we sometimes remember the annoying things in life more than the beautiful ones --- but it’s sometimes true.

And “sometimes” is the key --- it’s not that we only ever remember the things that rub us the wrong way --- but it is that we sometimes do --- that truly matters.

Perhaps in Matthew’s gospel today Jesus is sharing a story that is calculated to offend.

Most people if they’re honest with themselves don’t really like this story --- I love it ---- because it drives home the table turning reality of God’s grace -- ----- but most people --- not so much --- perhaps you can tell me after the service what you think --- maybe more people like it than I realize.

Either way --- this passage is a story that is calculated to offend.

A story that is designed to raise a few feathers.

And of course ----- we see this calculated to offend --- and raise a few feathers approach in scripture from time to time ----- the book of Amos is perhaps the classic example of words that were calculated to offend --- words that really got a rise out of people.

I'm willing to venture a guess that if we had work colleagues who were paid exactly the same as we were on an annual basis ---- and who were hired to do precisely the same job --- but only showed up for one hour a day compared to our 8 or 12 hour day --- we would be furious.

We would lodge a complaint --- or at the very least ask the simple question - -- why are we getting paid the same when I work a full day and they only ever work 1 hour a day.

Same job --- same qualifications ---- same gender --- same boss --- same company --- so what's up with that --- aren't harder workers rewarded accordingly?

It wouldn't be fair --- it wouldn't be right --- it would be outrageous --- and we would feel taken advantage of.

Simply put --- we would be asking ---- "How can it be?"

How can it be that we who works all day doing the same job gets paid the same as the other one who only works a 1 hour day?

"It just isn't fair!"

"I'm going to my boss about this one!"

"I'm taking this to my manger!"

"Me --- I'm off to my shop steward --- my union rep --- I'm not letting it go."

The workers in Matthew's gospel today respond this way ---- picking it up midway through verse 11-----

"...they began to grumble against the landowner ---- their boss ----- the one who hired them ---- "these who were hired last worked only one hour" --- they said ---- "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

They feel as though they have been taken advantage of --- manipulated perhaps even.

But of course nothing could be further than the truth --- they're still getting paid exactly what they agreed to work for.

The land owner --- their boss --- isn't cheating them or backing out of the payment deal they had already arranged.

Verse 13 --- "But he --- the landowner --- their boss --- answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for one denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

"Are you envious because I am generous?" ---- that's the crux of the matter - ---- they are you envious because he is generous to others but not generous with them.

People love generosity.

People love generosity right? ----- Is there anyone here who doesn't love generosity?

We all love generosity --- in general --- conceptually we're all for it.

It's the specifics of generosity that some of us struggle with.

We all love generosity ---- we just sometimes struggle when we feel as though we have been personally slighted because of generosity.

Imagine you are hired January 1st 2017 for a job.

And then someone else is hired February 1st 2017 for the exact same job only they start at \$15,000 or \$20,000 more than you.

You go to your boss asking for a raise --- and the response is ----
----- "Hold on a minute ---- I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for the exact wage you are being paid? O.K. then take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired a month later a little more because it's my prerogative. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

No one would --- or at least very few people if we're totally honest with ourselves ----- would reply to this saying --- "Oh I see ----- you want to be generous to the new employees but not me --- sure no problem --- because you know I'm a huge fan of generosity --- I understand now --- no problem boss ---- it's all good."

It would more likely be something like --- "What do you mean I don't get a raise to match the new employees --- you can't do that --- it's not fair --- how can you do that to me."

We would feel profoundly slighted and disrespected.

We are all for generosity ---- as long as that generosity also applies to us.

That's' a kind of selfish generosity ---- which of course is no generosity at all.

"How can it be?"

How can it be that the kingdom of heaven is like this --- where hard all day workers get rewarded the same as 1 hour workers?

How can it be --- it's not fair --- shouldn't the hardest and longest working person get rewarded more than the one who just shows up at the end of the day for an hour or so? ---- How can it be?

Amazing love ---- amazing God ----- amazing love of God --- that's how it can be.

But the workers just don't get it --- they're more concerned with how they feel than God's grace.

Thankfully there are also many in life who do get it --- who realize many situations aren't just about how they feel but are perhaps about the grace of God.

Look at our praise selection just before the message today ----- "And can it be that I should gain" ---- a beautiful hymn that reads like a theological thank you note to God.

Charles Wesley hymns read like theology.

Wesley writes with a deep and profound sense of the goodness and graciousness of God.

Never just about how he feels --- or about an emotional burst of love that is shallow and fleeting.

Great and powerful responses to God's goodness --- responses --- offerings with a deep and rich appreciation of just who God is.

Responses like that of the land owner ---- responses that model the goodness and the grace of God.

The ----- "How can it be?" ---- that Charles Wesley asks in "And can it be that I should gain." ----- is a far cry from the --- "How can it be." --- that the disgruntled workers ask about in Matthew 20 today.

The workers are talking about themselves --- and how unfair it all is --- how hard done by they are.

They are unhappy about just how the land owner --- their boss --- has doled out his generosity.

Charles Wesley is asking --- "How can it be?" --- that God would be so beautiful ---- good --- and true.

"How can it be?" ----- Wesley asks ---- that God would be so gracious and loving and caring --- so generous.

And of course he answers his own question --- "Amazing love!"

That's how it can be.

Amazing love --- amazing God --- amazing love of God.

Our passage from Matthew 20 today is all about the great --- and beautiful and good and saving generosity --- and grace of God.

The grace of God that turns everything upside down.

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” ----- our passage closes today.

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

God’s grace is that radical and usurping.

It turns everything upside down and on its head.

As the commentator said ----- “Sometimes the most memorable things are the things that rub us the wrong way.”

Sometimes stories that are calculated to offend --- well ----- offend us --- and rub us the wrong way and we don’t like it.

Amos ----- the whole book that bears his name ---- and Nathan from 2 Samuel chapter 12 --- are two clear and perfect other Biblical examples of stories that offend us --- stories that rub the hearer the wrong way and drive a point home.

Amos you may recall tells the people --- the Israelites ----- that the neighbouring countries --- also their enemies --- are deplorable precisely because they are so rich and well off and are only ever treating the poor in their midst badly.

And the people shout in agreement.

And then Amos goes on to say how deplorable it is when those blessed don’t share their blessings with the less fortunate ---- and all the people shout in agreement --- “Yes! --- Yes!”

And then Amos argues that anyone who treats people poorly like this should suffer and be made to pay.

And the people again shout ----- “Yes! --- Yes!”

And then Amos quickly turns on the people and says --- “You know ---- you are acting exactly like the rich people --- exactly like our enemy neighbours ---- you too are treating the poor in our communities badly ---- and it is

deplorable --- and just as you agreed that anyone treating people that poorly should be punished --- so you should be punished because you are doing exactly the same thing.”

And of course the people turn on him --- and instead of shouting ---“Yes! --- Yes!” ---- in agreement --- shout --- “Go away” --- and ---- “How dare you.”

They are like the people in Matthew’s gospel today who are grumbling.

They think they want generosity and grace --- but they really only want generosity and grace for themselves.

Like the all day workers in Matthew 20 today --- they shake their heads --- how can this be --- this isn’t right --- this isn’t fair.

They don’t really understand the nature of God’s grace ---- His saving love - --- His beauty --- goodness --- and truth.

And then there is Nathan in 2nd Samuel 12.

You may recall King David ---- a man with many wives already ---- who when he saw a woman he liked very much ----- and found out she was married --- had the husband killed by moving him to the front lines of the battle.

After doing this ----- having Uriah ---- Bathsheba’s husband killed so that he ----- David ---- could have Bathsheba all to himself ---- Nathan tells the following story.

The story about 2 men --- one who had only one sheep and one who had many.

And how the one who had many sheep went and stole the single lone sheep of the other.

Nathan and David both agree that the man with many sheep who stole the one lone sheep from the other is a scoundrel and as David says --- “Must die.”

Nathan then turns and says to David --- “You know that you are that man.”

“You are the man with many sheep ----- many women --- but you stole the one sheep --- that Uriah had --- his wife Bathsheba.”

Thankfully David ---- unlike the workers in Matthew 20 today --- thankfully David gets it --- and seeks the powerful and saving grace of God --- see Psalm 51 for David’s great plea for grace and mercy.

David doesn’t ask --- ‘How can this be?’

David isn’t grumbling ----- David falls at the feet of God seeking forgiveness and mercy and God’s profound and restorative grace and saving love.

If we have no understanding or appreciation --- if we have no sense of the great and saving beauty --- goodness and truth of God --- we get all caught up in fairness ----- and rightness --- rightness as humanly defined ----- with a self generated kind of order of cheques and balances --- and we find ourselves asking ----- “How can this be?” ----- when God and others act differently than we want them to.

See the workers in Matthew 20 today --- see the Israelites in the book of Amos.

When things don’t go as they want them to --- they feel hard done by.

Thee workers got paid what they had agreed to --- so why all the fuss?

Really why all the fuss.

The boss can pay whatever he wants to people they got what he promised – so why all the fuss.

Because they see someone else being treated generously and they don’t like it --- it isn’t fair.

When we have even the slightest appreciation for the magnitude of God’s grace --- and saving love --- and beauty and goodness and truth --- we are filled with delight --- not jealousy ---- and we have little time for things like fairness.

When we have even the slightest appreciation for the magnitude of God's grace --- we rejoice --- not grumble.

How can it be that God would say the kingdom of heaven is like ---- and then tell the story of a labourer who worked only one hour and a labourer who worked all day doing the exact same job --- get paid the exact same wage?

The answer is simple ---- grace.

Amazing love.

Not fairness ---- not cheques and balances --- not contracts and negotiations --- statutes and laws --- not even decency.

But grace --- and mercy.

Beauty -- goodness --- and truth.

Divine beauty --- Divine goodness ----- and Divine truth --- as if there is any other kind.

This passage is not about the land owner ---- or the workers --- and it's not about us and what we should do or learn.

It's about God --- and His beauty ---- and goodness --- and truth ----- and saving love.

His amazing grace --- and His unending mercy.

We too often want to simply jump to ---“What can I do? ---- and ---- “What am I supposed to do or be in light of this passage or that passage?”

Instead of what does this passage say about the great “I am” ----- “what does this passage say about the God of the burning bush.” --- “What does this passage say about the God of Abraham --- Isaac and Jacob ----- what does this passage say about the one true and living God --- what does this passage say and reveal about God.

The Bible is given for us ---- for sure ---- but is not chiefly about us.

It is all about God and His greatness ---- and His beauty ---goodness and truth ---- His saving love --- which finds its culmination at the cross.

Christ crucified on the cross.

“Amazing love ---- How can it be that thou my God should's't die for me?”

Is a profound proclamation about the mysterious --- and beautiful ---- and true saving love of God.

The labour all 12 hours of the day workers from Matthew 20 don't ever get this --- they are the centre around which everything evolves and they are disgruntled when it doesn't work out according to their expectations --- even when they are paid exactly what they were told they were going to be paid -- - what they agreed on long before they ever lifted a finger.

They see generosity and grace but are upset --- and enraged --- when they aren't the direct recipients of it.

The people in the prophecy of Amos --- read it for your self it's only 8 pages in total --- the people in the book of Amos are upset when the prophet tricks them into damning deplorable behaviour and then saying they are the ones acting deplorably and so should also be damned themselves.

But then thankfully there is also David who --- after being shown --- kind of trickily like Amos did ---- telling a story getting agreement and then turning the tables --- after seeing that he is acting poorly --- David turns on a dime and seeks forgiveness.

And this turning and seeking forgiveness once he realizes that he is acting poorly demonstrates ----- on a fundamental level ----- that he understands just how powerful grace actually is.

How can it be that God would be so forgiving and gracious and merciful.

How can it be that God would hang Himself up on the cross.

The answer ----- Amazing love.

Beauty --- goodness ----- and truth.

Something only the Lord of all power --- the great I am --- the God of the burning bush ----- could ever do.

Grace doesn't play be the rules.

And grace isn't fair.

The landowner paying the hardest workers the same as the least hardest workers isn't fair --- isn't right --- isn't what we expect.

But what's really wrong with it ----- it's his money why can't he do what he wants with it.

He didn't cheat anybody ---- he paid them all what they agreed to and in some cases more --- but no one was cheated --- not one worker was paid less than what they had agreed to at the beginning ---- so why all the grumbling?

Because they saw grace being exercised towards someone else and not also themselves.

Because they saw what the owner did and they had expectations --- agenda's ---- ideas of their own what fair and right meant.

When they saw him pay a full days work for one hours of work they thought they might get 8 or ten times what they had initially agreed upon.

But they didn't --- and they didn't because the owner knew they all simply need one days pay to survive --- and so everyone got what they need ---- no one was left in need.

Everyone was provided for just fine --- but they had expectations ---- and they had quickly calculated what they thought they "deserved".

The kingdom of God isn't about what we deserve.

And this is a story about the kingdom of God.

Everyone gets just what they need in the kingdom of God.

And that is good news --- because who really wants to get what they deserve --- as opposed to receiving God's grace.

The kingdom of God is about grace and not deservedness.

The kingdom of God is ---- God is gracious.

The kingdom of God isn't --- I deserve all this.

God is gracious --- God is gracious --- God is gracious.

How can it be that God is so gracious?

Well ---- He just is --- that's His very nature and always will be.

Just as the land owner made sure that at the end of the day everyone had exactly what they need ----- so God does too.

He is gracious.

And then He is gracious.

And then He is gracious again --- again and again.

And so we worship and give thanks to the great I am ----- the God of the burning bush ----- the God of Abraham --- and Isaac and of Jacob --- the one true and living God.

The kingdom of heaven is like this ----- God is gracious --- and then He is gracious ---- and then He is gracious --- again ----- again --- and again.

Amen.