

Sermon Title: Grace Stinks

Text: Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

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Place: Kingston Springs United Methodist Church

Season: 14th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 20; Ordinary 25

Main Point: God is good, but not fair - God's desire for the abundant harvest of life, joy, and justice is that abundant, and so is God's grace in offering the opportunity to all to be part of the harvest and its sufficient daily reward.

Sometimes grace stinks. It is just not fair.

I stood at my window watching two men who had been dropped off at my house to dig holes and make concrete footings for our new back porch. One worked alone and dug 5 of the 6 holes in hard, dry soil. The other one pushed the tip of his shovel into the hard ground. Then when the boss drove away he went to the swing. He swung and watched the other man work until he got tired. Then he slept in the swing for over 3 hours. When he awoke he went to his shovel and tried to dig in a couple of places. He found the ground was still hard so he left the shovel and went back to the swing until the bags of concrete were delivered. Then he directed the unloading and began to mix concrete in the holes the other man had dug.

I was angry at the lazy man. He was costing our contractor money - getting paid for sleeping in the swing. But more than that, it was unfair to the other man who worked while the other slept. It was just not fair. It really wasn't fair. And I was going to tell his boss.

The Boss gave me the opening I needed when I talked with him the next day and he asked me if I had talked with his two men. I asked how long they had been with him. One was only a few years, but the lazy one was 15 years! And the Boss was so proud of him because the building inspectors always passed his work, even when it wasn't quite finished. When he told a building inspector that he would do it just right like the other ones, they always got their acceptance.

I didn't tell him about the lazy man's offense... But I'm keeping my eye on him.

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That lazy man got paid for the same number of hours as the one who did all the hard labor. It was a good deal for the lazy man but it stinks for the guy who did all the work!

And the scripture story just flies in the face of fair labor standards. But it has become the standard for talking about God's grace in salvation. It explains clearly that the near death conversion of a sinner is as valid as the early conversion of a saint.

But there is more to this "last shall be first and the first shall be last" business than meets the eye.

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It is a miracle that I ever got a college degree. I almost washed out in my first year. I was undisciplined and very immature. One semester I slept through my English Composition final exam. I knew I was cooked! Maybe the teacher would give me a makeup, but i would certainly loose points that I could not afford to lose. I went to the teacher and confessed that I had been

up late at night prepping for finals and did not wake up. She had mercy and allowed me to come take the test with another class.

I slept through the makeup... Unbelievable! I was totally worthless! I considered not even going to talk to the teacher, but I went anyway. Can you believe that she let me come back and take the test in her office as she graded papers? Now that is grace, undeserved and complete. She did not even take off points. She treated my test like she did all the people who showed up at the right time.

I waited there as she graded my test. She said, "You know that I should not have let you take this test." Of course I knew. But she continued to tell me that she saw something in me that was worth letting me by this time. She expected me to take her generosity and use it wisely to graduate and succeed. She looked beyond my slovenly habits to anticipate what this moment could mean in my life beyond a course in English Comp. I don't remember her name, but I remember her grace.

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The story that Jesus told about the landowner is more than a story about labor. It is a story about success. Men in that culture were expected to work. It was a part of their self image. The ones who did not own land would go to the marketplace early in the morning hoping to be hired. They wanted to work - they did not want to be left sitting at the marketplace unemployed. Success was a day of hard work with a dinarius in one's hand to show for it.

As Jesus tells this story about the laborers, his listeners understand that the point is having the opportunity to work - to be a part of the harvest. The landowner did not have to pay those who were hired late in the day a full days pay. It was generous to simply give them an opportunity to help with the harvest. The equal pay was extravagant generosity.

God has an abundant desire for our lives to be filled with joy and justice. The success that God sees for us is that we will want to be a part of the harvest and its daily reward. Each day God comes into the marketplaces of our lives and gives us the opportunity to be God's day laborers. And in return God is prepared to give a full reward.

We are not saved by our works. But we are saved for God's work. And our daily reward is the inward knowledge that God has used us this day in the harvest.

Before this day is finished God will offer you work in the vineyard. We can't really predict what form or what time it will come. You will need to watch for it and take the opportunity when it is offered. Then, at the end of the day, you will feel deep inside you the reward for your day's work - it is the warm life-giving fullness of the Holy Spirit.