

Stories that would change the world: 2. The Threat of Grace

Matthew 20:1-16

July 19, 2020

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Imagine that you are living in the mid-18th Century England and you are watching a group of men gathered around a card table, playing a very competitive game of cards. Among them is a wealthy aristocrat who is intensely engaged in the game until he comes to a crisis point. He is hungry, so hungry that he can no longer focus on the game. He wants to leave the table to get something to eat but at the same time he does not want to leave the game. So he calls to a servant to get him something to eat – something very specific. He asks for a piece of meat to be placed between two pieces of bread. That way, he can eat the meat without getting his hands and the cards greasy. And just like that in 1762, the world had a new thing – and that new thing didn't change the world but I'm glad it became a reality. How many of us have had a sandwich and wondered what we would eat if no one had invented the sandwich? Maybe I'm the only one! John Montagu was the fourth Earl of Sandwich which is where it got its name. And now you know the story – and if it ever comes up in a game of trivia, you're ready. You will remember. That's the power of a story.

The creators of commercials know this. Let me show you what is considered by many one of the most powerful commercials of all time. [video] Sixty seconds and you were drawn in. You felt something. You had no idea what the commercial was about until the final image. What the creator of the commercial knew is that they weren't selling a product but a story, a story that invites you into an experience greater than our imagination. A week ago, I was hiking in Gooseberry Falls State Park when I came to this spot [photo] and I remembered when I was ten years old and our family was swimming at this point where the river enters into Lake Superior. And we got out of the water, went back to our campsite and sitting around a campfire, my dad told stories. That was more than 50 years ago, and I've not forgotten the stories. It's a reminder that if we want to impact the next generation, we need to help the next generation experience something that will tap into their imagination, creating a reality they otherwise would not imagine. That's the power of stories.

At the heart of our faith is a man, who with only three years and a group of twelve followers in a region of the world no larger than five square miles, told story after story that would change the world. Jesus was the best storyteller. The Gospel of Mark says this about his storytelling: **With many stories like these, [Jesus] presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots.** The gospels provide us with 40 of the stories he told. It is in the stories that we meet Jesus and are drawn into the heart of faith. Jesus' stories were not simple stories, but stories that push us to understand who we are and how we live and view the world around us. And then he invites us into a new world order. These are stories that would change the world.

The story from today's scripture comes at a point when Jesus' disciples asked, "Where do we stack up? We've given up everything to follow you, so where do we stand?" And he replies with this story about a landowner: **The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.** He offers them a job and offers to pay them enough so that they are glad to work that day in the vineyard. And that's the world as it ought to be – a picture of the kingdom of heaven. God wants us to be part of the kingdom so that we might have all that we need. And this would be a beautiful story if that's where it stopped, but it doesn't stop there. It turns out the landowner did not hire enough workers so he returns to the

marketplace four more times to hire more workers – at 9:00, at noon, at 3:00, and an hour before quitting time. At the end of the day, the landowner gathers all of the workers to pay them for their work. Who is this landowner? It's God, who calls to his manager, Jesus, and says: **“Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.”** As he prepares to give them their wages, those who put in the least amount of time are at the front of the line, and at the end of the line are those who put in a twelve hour day. As everyone is watching, those who worked an hour are given a full day's wages. Imagine their surprise, and then imagine those at the end of the line. They must be thinking, if that's what those who worked one hour receive, imagine what we will receive for working twelve hours. But when they get to the front of the line, what happens? They receive the exact same amount as those who worked for an hour.

This doesn't seem fair, and those who worked all day are enraged. They've been cheated. In fact, I asked Brian Dreibelbis about this. He's one of this nation's top labor negotiators. Brian said, “The workers do have a fair complaint, they should not have been treated equally, given some worked more than others. Today, we have the FLSA (Fair Labor Standards Act), and that would prohibit this, and certainly a union / Collective Bargaining Agent would not allow it either.” And, Brian said, “the owner is not treating them fairly either.” This is no way to build a cohesive Team in his Vineyard. This is not a story about business practices. This is a story about God's love for us – a landowner who goes out looking for people so they will get what they need, a landowner who does not go out once but keeps going out until all are in the vineyard. This is a story of God's generosity, but our eyes go to the end of the line and how unfair it is to those at the end of the line. And **when we focus on the line, we miss out on what God is doing for us.**

And that's our struggle, isn't it? This tendency to look at others in the line and make judgments based on who they are and what they do. I would never do that. I would never be like that. I have never said that or lived like that. We rank ourselves above others. And when we compare, we drive a wedge between us. Or, we look at what's in the world and how others are living and we become envious. Or, we blame the landowner – even rude to the landowner who was generous enough to invite us all into the vineyard so no one would be left out or left behind. And what happens when we get into this comparison game, when we focus on the end of the line – we are robbed of the joy of seeing everyone is included – and everyone has enough. It becomes a wall that keeps us from God's generosity. Am I the only one who struggles with this? Do you see God's generosity, or do you see the line? Do you have a Facebook account? Not everyone that you see on Facebook is as rich or as attractive or as smart or clever or as joyous as they appear on Facebook. There are recent studies that indicate spending time on Facebook is a great way to get depressed. It's hard to keep from comparing our inner lives with other people's outer lives. I think it was Anne Lamott who said: **“Don't compare your insides to everyone else's outsides.”** What we see on Facebook is not real – or at least not the whole picture of someone's life. Last week, I cleaned a bathroom in our house and it occurred to me that I've never seen that on Facebook – and yet we spend more time cleaning bathrooms than traveling to some exotic location. But which one gets posted on my Facebook page? And if comparison focuses on trips I'm not taking but others are, it's robbing me of life. Don't focus on the line.

Jesus is saying the kingdom of heaven is about a landowner who would invite everyone into the vineyard, regardless of what you've done or left undone, regardless of whether you worked a full day or barely worked at all. You are loved. You are valued. Don't forget it. And as much as we are tempted to look at the line, Jesus calls to look at the generosity of the landowner.

A week ago, I spent the week in a cabin on the North Shore. It rained most of one day, and so I sat down and read Bryan Stevenson's book, *Just Mercy*. Maybe you've read it or watched the movie based on the book. Stevenson is the founder of Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. He has dedicated his life to helping the poor, the incarcerated, and those who sentenced to death row. Over the years, he has won the release of 135 persons on death row who turned out to be innocent – and he has won relief for hundreds of others who were unfairly sentenced. His life is rooted in the faith tradition of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The book chronicles the case of Walter McMillian, convicted and sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. After five years of working to prove McMillian's innocence, he was finally released from prison in 1993. In the book, Stevenson says: **“If we can look at ourselves closely and honestly, I believe we will see that we all need justice, we all need mercy, and perhaps, we all need some measure of unmerited grace.”**

It was almost twenty years ago, that a young woman came to my office seeking assistance. She was a single mom pregnant with what would be her third child, living in subsidized housing, no job, no money, in an apartment that had almost no furniture. And as I listened to her story, I remember thinking “how could you let yourself get into this situation.” I'm not proud of what I was thinking, but I'm being honest with you. She needed money for a car repair. I didn't know her, and I didn't know if anything she was telling me was true, but I gave her the money for the car repair and an additional amount for other needs. And I remember speaking with Pastor Dick who knew about furniture that he delivered to her apartment so everyone would have a bed. A few days later, I received this handwritten letter. I've kept her note all these years because her note surprised me – not by what she said but in the way I had so wrongly judged her. She wrote:

“Pastor Richards, I just want to be obedient to the Lord and His word in Malachi how he says that basically its in the best interest of his children to pay our tithes and offerings. It's a sacrifice and I only have four dollars until October 30. It's easy to trust God when we have a regular pay check coming in from working, but I tell you it's hard to trust him when you receive only \$530 per month and not even hardly providing for your family. I haven't paid my tithes in a while so I decided I need a change and God's favor in my life.

Pastor, I lost everything I had worked so hard to accomplish. My ex promised to keep up payments on my things I had in storage after he left us here and headed back to Illinois. He broke his promise and I lost everything, all of my business equipment from my day care, furniture, bedroom sets, just everything. So now I have to try and start over completely. I feel really bad by this so Pastor I'm humbly asking that until I can get to and from church to hear the word of God, please hold us up in prayer before the Lord.”

Included in her letter were four 1 dollar bills. Her last four dollars.

We make value statements when we compare or we make sweeping generalizations based on what we see on the outside. Don't compare your insides to someone else's outsides. Let your meaning and value be rooted in a God who like the landowner extended grace and mercy to all.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 19, 2020

Weekly Prayer: O God, your ways are not our ways, and therefore we ask that you instruct us in the way everlasting. Guide us upon your path. Instill your truth in our hearts that we would live more fully regardless of circumstance. Keep our eyes so focused upon you that we would live only to serve and praise you all the days of our lives. Amen.

Monday, July 20

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: “Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”

Observation: Most people thought tax collectors were among the last people you’d ever find in God’s Kingdom. Jesus story said there was more value in a tax collector’s humble faith (“struck his chest” was a gesture of sorrow) than in a Pharisee’s swollen spiritual ego. Luke said Jesus told this story “to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust.” The Pharisee didn’t trust in God’s mercy, because it never crossed his mind that he needed it!

Application: Which character in this parable are you more often like: the Pharisee, looking down on others with disgust, or the tax collector, feeling a deep inner sense of need for grace? How can God’s love and grace help you maintain a healthy awareness of spiritual need, yet avoid contempt either for others or for yourself?

Prayer: O God, Hebrews 4:16 invites me to come before you “with confidence,” not because I’m good, but because you are. Help me live confident of your grace, but never arrogant about my goodness. Amen.

Tuesday, July 21

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-10

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard. “Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ And they went. “Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’ ““Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied. “He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion.

Observation: In Jesus’ day, agricultural field workers had even fewer rights than they do today. The owner in the story Jesus told was not typical. He hired extra workers near the end of the day, and overpaid them. The “all day” workers in the story watched those who’d only worked an hour receive the same amount that they had agreed to work for. (We can imagine their pro-rated

mental calculations— “Maybe we’ll get 8 days’ wages!”) But they got a full day’s wages, too— exactly what they had agreed to.

Application: Does the master’s way of paying the workers in this story feel unfair to you? It was not unfair, of course. No one was underpaid; it was just that some received unreasonable generosity. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul said Christ was treated as we deserved, and we are treated as he deserved. In what ways does that “unfair” exchange draw your heart toward Christ?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, if I’m a recent arrival in your kingdom, thank you for welcoming me generously. And if I’m one who’s been here longer, help me to celebrate your generosity and seek to share it with others. Amen.

Wednesday, July 22

Scripture: Matthew 20:11-16

When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ‘These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’ “But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”

Observation: Jesus heard lots of grumbling during his earthly ministry. The religious leaders seemed to deeply resent him offering salvation to tax collectors and sinners who hadn’t worked “the whole day in the hot sun.” The landowner’s questions were God’s questions: “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?” The fact was this landowner has not wronged the complaining workers by showing extra benevolence to others. Grace is not fair; it is generous.

Application: Many psychologists, as well as preachers, have observed that we humans tend to ask “Why me?” about bad things that happen to us, but not about good things. Like the “all day” workers in Jesus’ story (“they thought they would receive more”), if anything we tend to think we deserve better. When have you found yourself inflating your expectations because of what you’ve seen someone else receive? What helps you counteract this natural tendency?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, shape me and grow me into a person who has the same generous attitude toward others that you have toward me. Amen.

Thursday, July 23

Scripture: Luke 16:1-13, 14:33

Jesus also said to the disciples, “A certain rich man heard that his household manager was wasting his estate. He called the manager in and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give me a report of your administration because you can no longer serve as my manager.’ “The household manager said to himself, What will I do now that my master is firing me as his manager? I’m not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg. I know what I’ll do so that, when I am removed from my management position, people will welcome me into their houses. “One by one, the manager sent for each person who owed his master money. He said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil.’ The manager said to

him, 'Take your contract, sit down quickly, and write four hundred fifty gallons.' Then the manager said to another, 'How much do you owe?' He said, 'One thousand bushels of wheat.' He said, 'Take your contract and write eight hundred.' "The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted cleverly. People who belong to this world are more clever in dealing with their peers than are people who belong to the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves so that when it's gone, you will be welcomed into the eternal homes. "Whoever is faithful with little is also faithful with much, and the one who is dishonest with little is also dishonest with much. If you haven't been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? If you haven't been faithful with someone else's property, who will give you your own? No household servant can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

In the same way, none of you who are unwilling to give up all of your possessions can be my disciple.

Observation: A wasteful steward faced dismissal. Given time for a final report, the steward instead "cooked the books" more, earning himself favor while costing his master more money. Jesus said, "The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted cleverly." Did Jesus endorse cheating? No (don't forget it's a parable). The swindler won the master's (grudging) admiration because he went after his chosen values with all his energy. Jesus asked: if even a swindler can do that, shouldn't my followers put equal thought and energy into living out the kingdom's values?

Application: This guy bought friends with money! Jesus is suggesting we act with the same kind of foresight and use our money for that which is lasting. What are some ways you can pursue things that will truly last? What would it look like for you, as Jesus' follower, to seek to live out Jesus' values every day with as much ingenuity and vigor as the servant gave to assuring his financial security after his firing?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your story was puzzling, but it makes me think. I want to be serious about your kingdom, and stay open to new approaches to accomplish your work. Amen.

Friday, July 24

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-21, 24-34

"Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

"Therefore, I say to you, don't worry about your life, what you'll eat or what you'll drink, or about your body, what you'll wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn't dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it's alive today and tomorrow it's

thrown into the furnace, won't God do much more for you, you people of weak faith? Therefore, don't worry and say, 'What are we going to eat?' or 'What are we going to drink?' or 'What are we going to wear?' Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire first and foremost God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Observation: Jesus said that making the pursuit of wealth the center, the guiding standard, of your life inevitably conflicts with loyalty to God. He stated the common-sense principle (which we often forget) that "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Then he pointedly added, "You cannot serve God and wealth." Treasure in heaven, treasure by God's standards, is the most precious item we can collect.

Application: Conduct a simple life audit. Review your calendar and your checkbook. Based on the time, energy and resources reflected there, what "master(s)" would you say you are serving? Can you see your loyalties shifting as you choose to invest in heavenly treasure? What kinds of changes could you make to give you greater freedom to fully serve God as Lord of your life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, calling you "Lord" isn't just a nice, polite title. It means that you rule over my life and my priorities. Give me the courage and devotion to truly mean it when I call you "Lord." Amen.

Saturday, July 25

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:13-19; Acts 3:1-10

Therefore, once you have your minds ready for action and you are thinking clearly, place your hope completely on the grace that will be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed. Don't be conformed to your former desires, those that shaped you when you were ignorant. But, as obedient children, you must be holy in every aspect of your lives, just as the one who called you is holy. It is written, *You will be holy, because I am holy*. Since you call upon a Father who judges all people according to their actions without favoritism, you should conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your dwelling in a strange land. Live in this way, knowing that you were not liberated by perishable things like silver or gold from the empty lifestyle you inherited from your ancestors. Instead, you were liberated by the precious blood of Christ, like that of a flawless, spotless lamb.

Peter and John were going up to the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon, the established prayer time. Meanwhile, a man crippled since birth was being carried in. Every day, people would place him at the temple gate known as the Beautiful Gate so he could ask for money from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he began to ask them for a gift. Peter and John stared at him. Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gazed at them, expecting to receive something from them. Peter said, "I don't have any money, but I will give you what I do have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, rise up and walk!" Then he grasped the man's right hand and raised him up. At once his feet and ankles became strong. Jumping up, he began to walk around. He entered the temple with them, walking, leaping, and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God. They recognized him as the same one who used to sit at the temple's Beautiful Gate asking for money. They were filled with amazement and surprise at what had happened to him.

Observation: The letter we call 1 Peter seemed to particularly address new converts to the Christian faith. Peter addressed how our redemption did (“the precious blood of Christ”) and didn’t (“perishable things like silver or gold”) come about. It wasn’t just theory for Peter. Acts 3 reported the vivid story of how the Holy Spirit worked through Peter and John to offer Jesus’ healing to a disabled man who started out hoping for nothing more than a few coins in his beggar’s bowl.

Application: Peter and John showed no interest in profiting from the man they healed. In what ways are today’s assumptions about the connection between money and healing helpful to human well-being? In what ways, if any, do you believe they are damaging? How did Peter, in his letter, explicitly reject any idea that we might be able to redeem ourselves? In whose character and actions did Peter instead firmly ground our confidence of redemption? God did not redeem us to leave our lives unaltered. In what part(s) of your life is God calling you to live differently? How will you respond?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, wherever your followers went, people’s lives got better. I want to follow you as they did, open to let your power flow through me to better the lives of others. Amen.