

## Grace of God, Radical Equality

Matthew 20:1-16

Today is designated as Dedication Sunday for our 2009 Church leadership at Faith UMC. I congratulate you, leaders of this church, since you are called as faithful workers in the Garden of God by God through this church. May God's delight shine upon you and may His blessing be on you!

The scripture reading, Matthew 20:1-16, is very interesting and also one of the difficult verses to be interpreted in the Bible. However, this scripture reading gives us some insight and curiosity regarding issue of employment, unemployment, and social justice we find today in the United States.

Social justice issue always follow the issue of economic power and disparity between the have's and the have not's. Economic unbalance always brings forth justice issues individually, socially, nationally and internationally, and such imbalance leads to quarrels, divisions, fights and wars in any situation. All kinds of serious social issues arise from economic issues. So, human beings must inherently be economic beings.

I have seen two kinds of economic structures in this world: structures based on the principles of Capitalism and those based on principles of Communism. By "Communism," I am referring to an economic structure, apart from the political structures that have followed "Communism" in the world through modern history. There are two distinct psychological attitudes reflected in these two economic structures, Capitalism and Communism. The economic Communist might say "I hate for somebody to have more than I have. So, everybody has to have the same." While the Capitalist might say, "Everybody has to have according to one's effort and ability. That is fair. Since I invested more effort than anybody else, I deserve to have more than others." I don't know what your stand point may be on this issue, but economics is a serious and sensitive issue in our lives.

We have a new President, and President Obama seems to be trying to make changes in his Administration from the previous Administration in terms of equality and responsibility. That may be a good thing. Liberty and Equality are two anchors of Americanism. But, sometimes these two virtues can be incompatible. That is what I see as the irony of America today. We pursue unlimited liberty, which can result in the curtailment of equality. At the same time, we pursue unfettered equality, in a communal sense, that invades the boundary of private liberty.

However, we can all agree with Present Obama's statement in his inauguration speech that everybody should have an opportunity to work. This is the picture of today's scripture reading. Everybody is eligible to work and everyone deserves to have compensation with a proper wage. Without work, one can not be responsible. This is the theme of today's scripture reading.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard goes like this. A vineyard owner was looking for workers. Since he needed workers desperately he got up early in the morning and went to the market place to look for workers. He found workers there and hired men to work at his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

A few hours later, about at 9:00 A.M., he went again to the market place and found men standing there doing nothing. He hired them and agreed to pay whatever is right and sent these men into his vineyard.

He went again to the market place about noon to look for even more workers, and found men and hired them and agreed to pay whatever right and sent them also into his vineyard.

And, he went to the market place again at 3:00 P.M., found workers, hired them, and sent these into his vineyard. And again at 5:00 P.M., he went to the same place, found men who were standing at the market place doing nothing. He found them and he hired them also, and sent them into his vineyard.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."

The workers who were hired about at 5:00 P.M. came and each received a denarius. So, when those who were hired first came, they expected to receive more. But, each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. "These men who were hired last worked only one hour, and you paid them an amount equal to what you paid us, we who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

The owner answered to them "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Didn't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Here we meet arguments regarding the owner's way of paying wages. Logically, the what the owner said is right. But, from our perspective of the principle of economic fairness, he is not fair and his way could not be applied to our social structure. This is a debatable issue. Jesus told us this story as a parable of the Kingdom of God. "For the kingdom of heaven is like this." It is an answer to Peter's question, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"(Matthew 19:27)

To us, at first thought, it seems that the owner's manner of paying wages is unfair. If the owner is implied in this parable to represent God, then in this parable the image of God is not fair to us. Do you think that God is fair to you? Many people would argue with God, saying, "Why me God?" People have a tendency to see themselves compared with others. When we feel unfortunate in comparison to others, we may complain to God, "God

is unfair to me!" This is what we see reflected in the scripture lesson today. However, I would like to say that the grace of God is a grace of "absolutely equal, radical equality."

We should not measure God to our worldly standard. Our standards are derived from relative norms, from human consensus. The Bible says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. And, the Scriptures continue, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

We can not argue with the realm of God. In another scripture reading, we find this issue explored when it is written, "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" As the potter, God has the absolute right to use His will. We are not to argue about God's will, which we can not understand in our knowledge. This is the realm of God.

So, I am not taking about and or even trying to rationalize God's will for us. But, I would like to consider God's will in terms of a way of believing in God in Christian life.

Let's consider the vineyard as a symbol for the church. I would like to see you and me, and all those who believe in God as workers called by God. And then, imagine what the Lord would pay us for our wages? There are three kinds of God's grace in this context: redemption, salvation and admission.

As I mentioned previously, the vineyard symbolizes the church. We, as believers, are called to be workers in this vineyard to do the work of worship, fellowship and workmanship. I will explain why those three "works" are important in religious life.

First of all, in dealing with God's grace, redemption is absolutely fair. When we take a look our driver's license, we can find that we are classified in such terms as social location (my address), age, gender, skin color (hair/eye color), and physical appearance, (height and weight). Even based on these basic classifications, we may be treated by others in disparate ways. Treating people disparately based on basic classifications results in racism, ageism, sexism, and many other "isms" in our society. Sometimes we may have felt in our lives that we were not treated well by classifications of race, age, gender, physical appearance, or social class and by the bias for or against these classifications in our society. However, God's grace is absolute equal, available to all no matter any type of classification.

A lady went to the bank. She deposited her checks and asked to withdraw the sum from her account. Then, a teller asked the lady, "Do you need redemption?" "What denomination?" The lady replied, "I am a Methodist. And I am saved by faith! Do you need to check my credit for faith to release my money from my account? Is this a bank or a church!?"

God redeems us from our sin no matter what. No matter how serious our sins are, God redeems us by His grace and by our profession of faith. The seriousness of each of our sins may be different, but God treats us equally as children of God.

Are we envious because God redeems not only us but also our neighbor who treated us badly? A debtor of a thousand dollars and a debtor of a million dollars may be quite different in our sight, but no such difference exists for God's redemption of all who are debtors to Him. God's grace is a grace of radical equality towards everyone.

Second, the Salvation of God is the only wage of faith. Eternal life is the agreement that God offers us when we profess our faith. There is nothing better than salvation for us to earn from a Christian life. The Salvation is the denarius that we are expecting from God. Salvation is offered to us, every Christian, from God. It is the radically equal grace of God. No matter how late we started our belief in God, no matter how early others started their belief in God, we will equally earn Salvation, eternal life, by the Grace of God. There is no racism, sexism, ageism, social-class classification or bias in the grace of God. That is radical equality!

Salvation is not earned by our deeds or virtue. It is gift freely given to us in accordance of God's grace. However, we need to check our faith so that we may reflect the grace of God in our own lives, each moment giving thanks to God.

A minister was at the airport to catch a flight for Columbus, where he was going to be guest-preaching. As he was checking his luggage at the check-in desk, suddenly the attendant said in a bright, happy voice, "Oh, you are a Special Selectee today, so you will need to go in to the main desk!" So he thought, "Wow! A Special Selectee! That probably means a free ticket or upgrade to First Class or a special prize!"

At the main desk inside, it happened again. The young woman at the desk said cheerily, "Oh, you are a Special Selectee today!" Finally, he said, "Thank you! What does that mean?" She replied, "It means you have been selected to have your luggage thoroughly screened today, so take your luggage over there." Oh, what joy to be a Special Selectee! The minister realized that he had instinctively wanted to be singled-out for special treatment, to be in a superior position than his fellow travelers.

Since he was a thoughtful minister, reflecting on his experience, he concluded, "I may need to take a moment to carefully screen my heart, and the quality of the 'Love Luggage' in it as well!" The one who was hired early morning by the owner expected a special bonus for his early hire. He wanted to be in a superior position than the other workers. But, there was not such a bonus. Salvation is the highest wage for the worker in God's vineyard. And, it is an equal wage for all believers.

Lastly, there is radical equality in the admission to the vineyard. We are called to worship God. We are called to have fellowship in God. And, also we are called to be in partnership as workers of God. If you do not worship, you would miss the blessing from

God. If do not have fellowship in God, you would lose out on tasting the love of God. If you do not participate in being a co-worker for God, you would not be able to see yourself as one whose life is in co-workmanship with God.

Speaking of work and responsibility, I think of when my two girls were in their very early teens. One Saturday afternoon, they rushed through the door, dashed into the living room, and jumping on the couch, exclaimed, "Dad! Mom! We got jobs!" We were curious what was going on with our kids and found standing before us two girls clad in brand new McDonald's uniforms, giving us a fashion show. I had mixed feelings at that time: "Such innocent girls, my two daughters, finally jumped into the real world, and they are getting to know what responsibility is."

When I was their age, I was just a boy, just a dreaming boy. I needed money but I didn't know how to get it responsibly. It seemed to me that my daughters were much more mature than I was at their age, and also that they were more independent than I had been. That also meant to me that I was losing the role of being a parent a bit, the role of supporting, protecting and providing for them. It was a sad feeling. I had been sullen, but at that time I should have congratulated them and their mature attitudes.

When Michelangelo was a young boy, he came to a master sculptor asking to be accepted as a student. The master sculpture told young Michelangelo that he did not know what he was asking for nor realize what sculpture means: "This will take your life!" Michelangelo replied, "What else is life for?"

That is what Jesus Christ shows us: How to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to do it joyfully, saying, "What else is life for?"

Do you want a great formula for life? Here it is: Life is worth living. People are worth loving. Jesus Christ is worth following. Follow him. Imitate him. Learn him. Serve him. Trust him.

The wage of sin is death eternal, but the wage of faith is redemption, salvation and participation in the joy of God's banquet. There is no exclusion among those who believe in God. God's grace is absolutely equal to every believer. This radical equality is God's ultimate grace, an equality which the world can not follow.

God is good, all the time. God is fair to everybody with God's grace. God is absolute graceful eternal.