

“Miracle Grace’

Matthew 20:1-16

Let’s see. We need \$49,000 to replace the roof on the educational wing. We need \$68,000 to re-anchor, clean, caulk, and reseal the stone facing on the tower. We need \$50,000 to replace 56 year old boilers and to remove the chimney in the educational wing. We need \$15,000 to improve our web-site. That’s a total of \$182,000. We have just over 600 family giving units in our church family. If we divided it equally among our 600 families that would be \$30 per family. Unfortunately about half of most churches family’s financially support their church. That would be true of Divinity. That would up it to \$60 per family. Unfortunately, because of a lack of jobs and/or skills some of our family’s homes are being foreclosed on, some are living from paycheck to paycheck, some are single mom’s, and some who have money, are just too tight to gift it toward fixing our church building. How many of us are left? How do we do the math? What’s motivating us to truly make this a miracle Sunday?

Our gospel text for this Sunday teaches us how God does the math when he’s doling out his grace and forgiveness. Who gets more and who gets less?

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” His operation was not on the scale of Ernest and Julio Gall, but it was quite respectable. We first see this gentleman on the evening of the Second Sunday in October. September has been a perfect month – hot and dry – and his grapes are ready. His meteorological service tells him the weather is about to turn cold. So what does he do? He gets up first thing on Monday morning, goes down to what passes for the local hiring hall and contracts for as much day labor as he can pick up. Unfortunately, every other grower in the neighborhood uses the same

weather reports, so he has to promise a good daily wage to attract the workers he needs. \$120 for the day is the figure that guarantees him a crew.

“After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.” He loads his crew into a couple of old school buses and puts them to work. Just before 9 a.m., though, he gets another weather bulletin. They have moved the start of the 3 weeks of rain and cold from Wednesday back to Tuesday. He has one day, not two, to get the harvest in. He needs more workers.

When he went out about 9:00, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about 3:00, he did the same.

It’s a huge harvest, though, and with only one hour left before dark, he realizes he won’t get it in on time without still more help. So he goes out again, but the hiring hall is closed by now and the village square has only its usual crowd of up-to-the-minute losers hanging out in a haze of smoke. You know the types; lots of leather, some girls and their boyfriends with more mousse than brains, six packs everywhere, and music that rupture eardrums.

What the heck, it’s worth at least a try. So he walks up to the group, switches off the offending ghetto blaster, and goes into his spiel: he owns a vineyard, they could probably use a buck and he needs the help; so what do they think? They figure it won’t take that long and whatever he pays; at least it’s a couple more six packs for the night. Off they go.

This is the last group our gospel text describes when it says: “About 5:00, he went out and found others standing around and he said to them, “Why are you standing idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.”

Now then, run your mind over the story so far. I'm sure you know exactly what happens each time one of those new batches of workers gets dropped off at the vineyard. Before they pick even a single grape, they make sure they find out from the workers already on the job exactly how much they will be paid. The early morning 12 hour workers say they're getting \$120 for the day. They figure that's \$10 per hour so the four later groups figure they'll be paid \$90, \$60, \$30 and \$10 respectively.

But the vineyard owner has a surprise for them. At the end of the day, he is a happy man. With his best and biggest harvest on the way to the stemmer-crusher, he feels great. So he says to the foreman, "I have a wild idea. I'm going to fill the pay envelopes myself. But when you give them out, I want you to do it backwards, beginning with the last ones hired."

You know what happens. When the first girl with purple hair gets her envelope and walks away opening it, she finds six crisp, new twenties inside. What does she do? She keeps on walking fast to her next violin lesson.

But when her shirt-open-to-the-waist boyfriends catch up to her and tell her they got \$120 too . . . well, dear old human nature triumphs again. They cannot resist going back and telling everybody else what jerks they were for sweating a whole day in the hot sun when they could have made the same money for just an hour's work.

Our text describes it this way. "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to the manager, call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first. When those hired about 5:00 came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received the usual daily wage."

Did you see what happened? When the workers who were on the job longer heard the ones who worked one hour received \$120, they did some quick mental bookkeeping and figured they'd get paid \$120 an hour. And what do they then come up with? Smiles! They conclude they are about to get paid \$360, or \$720, or \$1,080, or \$1,440.

But the vineyard owner, like God, has a surprise for them. Every last envelope has 6 twenties in it: no more for those who worked all day, and no less for those who did not.

Those who worked all day are angry. "Hey man", they say, "those punks over there only worked one hour and we knocked ourselves out all day. How come you made them equal to us?"

From our text, "And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner saying, these last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."

The vineyard owner is ready to respond. "Look, pal," he says. The Greek word translated as "friend" in the parable is an unfriendly word for friend that's also used to describe Judas at the betrayal. So it's more like, "Look, Pal, you agreed to \$120 a day. I gave you \$120. Take it and get out of here before I call the cops. If I want to give some pot-head in Gucci loafers the same pay as you, so what? You're telling me I can't do as I want with my own money? I had a fun idea. I decided to put the first last and the last first, to show you there are no insiders or outsiders here. When I'm happy, everybody's happy, no matter what they did or didn't do. I'm not asking you to like me, just enjoy me. If you want to mope, that's your business. But since the only thing it will get you is a lousy disposition, why don't you just shut up and go into the tasting room and have your self a free glass of Chardonnay? The choice is up to you, friend. Have fun or get out. Take your pick."

Those of us who work hard all day in the kingdom and who have or will write big checks to truly make this a miracle Sunday have a hard time swallowing parables like this from Jesus. It's about a grace that works by raising the dead, bringing in the lost, not by rewarding the reward-able. Just like in the parable of the Prodigal Son, this parable takes the industrious workers like the older son who stayed home to work his father's farm, and whacks them over the head with the bad news that there is only Good News: even the prodigal sons of the world will be welcomed into God's Kingdom even if they only work the last few minutes or even the last few seconds. So whether you've been working hard on the capital campaign committee all summer and have been to visit fellow Divinity workers in their homes or you haven't done a thing until you write your check, or fill out your commitment card, this morning – you're all the same in God's eyes.

When the thief hanging on the cross next to Jesus confesses his faith as death draws near, Jesus responds, "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

It's not fair. When you work hard your whole life raising your family, helping your grandchildren, teaching Sunday School, serving in the church, tithing your income; that those who show up at the very end, should receive the same reward.

It's not fair that we don't keep books and the bookkeeping is not a part of the kingdom of heaven. For in that eternal and happy state, the books are ignored forever and there is only the Book of Life. And in that book, nothing stands against you. There are no debt entries that can keep you out of the clutches of the Love that will not let you go. Your debts are forgiven as you stand before the Lamb who sacrificed Himself on the cross for you and for all of us who come into his vineyard at any time of the day.

For if the world could have been saved by bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses, not Jesus. The law was just fine. And God gave it over 3 thousand years ago to see if anyone could pass a test like that. But when nobody did, when it became perfectly clear that there was “no one who was righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10). That both Jews and Gentiles alike were all under the power of sin” (Romans 3:9) – God gave up on salvation by the books. He cancelled everybody’s records in the death of Jesus and rewarded all people of faith, equally and fully, with a new creation in the resurrection of the dead.

Evil cannot be gotten out of the world by reward and punishment, by bookkeeping. The only way to solve the problem of evil is for God to do what he did: to take it out of the world by taking it unto himself – into the dead body of Jesus on the cross – to close the books on it forever. That way the kingdom of heaven is for every person of faith who judges not, who does not keep books, and hell is reserved only for the idiots who insist on judging and keeping records in their heads. We’re not going to keep records on this Miracle Sunday. There will be no plaque listing who gave what. Instead, we give in response to what he’s given us. We give to preserve this house that has been passed down to us from our parent’s and grandparent’s generation. We give so this can be passed down to our children and grandchildren as a place where their faith can be learned, nurtured, and celebrated.

One last comment. The landowner in this parable has fun. He enjoys paying everyone the same. He enjoys surprising everyone. He enjoys bringing everyone into his vineyard. Heaven, in short, is fun. It may not be fair, but it’s fun. Let’s have a taste of that heavenly fun today in making this a truly “Miracle Sunday.”

#669 – Rise Up, O Saints of God!