

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Round your table, through your giving,  
Show us how to live and pray  
Till your kingdom's way of living  
Is the bread we share each day.  
Bread for us and for our neighbor  
Bread for body, mind and soul  
Bread of heaven and human labor  
Broken bread that makes us whole.  
(Leith Fisher)*

Every commentary on the parable in Matthew 20 talks endlessly about how unfair it is that all the laborers were paid the same despite the fact that some worked all day and overtime, and some worked hardly at all. Foolish commentators, slow of heart to believe all that Jesus did and taught. I have read this parable for a lifetime, and the seeming inequity has never bothered me at all. And frankly, I'll bet it's never bothered you either. This parable is supposed to be good news, and it is full to the brim with good news. News of God's abundant grace.

First off — this is a parable of the kingdom of God — not a comment about labor relations. “The *kingdom of heaven* is like a landowner who went out in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” This is not about fair trade coffee; this parable is about God's grace.

When I was in college, there was a group of us who gathered in the Episcopal Campus Ministry Center lounge in the afternoons to talk theology — yes, I was weird even then — and we would make up hypothetical situations to test church teaching. If you were a castaway on a desert island, and you were a devout Christian, could you, a layman, celebrate the Eucharist with Coke and pretzels if they were the only elements at hand, and would it be a valid act of sacramental worship? Now that was worth an hour's debate. And then there was the passenger in a two-seater Piper Cub who kills the pilot and then himself by jumping out of the plane. If he genuinely repented of the murder and his attempt to kill himself before he landed and died, would he go to heaven? If we had time, we could divide ourselves into small groups and discover your answers to this puzzle when you report back.

Thankfully, we don't need to do that. The parable answers the questions for both of these situations. When we seek God's grace to provide for us what we cannot provide for ourselves, we never ask God to give us what we deserve. We ask God to give us what we need. When God is graceful, God gives us what we need, not what we deserve. It must be that way, or we are all lost, for what we deserve is God's eternal wrath. What we receive is God's everlasting love. Grace is never earned — grace can only be humbly received.

Did God ask the Israelites if they deserved to be fed in the wilderness, or did God give more manna to some than to others? No, God just provided manna for them all to eat. Paul, condemned to die in prison, writes to the Philippians that if he died it would be grace because he would be with the Lord. If he lived, it would be grace, because he would be able to continue his service to them. Whether he lived, therefore, or died, he is the Lord's, and that is all that matters. Grace is all you need. It isn't fair; it is necessary though, if anyone is to be saved.

So, the grace of God in Holy Communion can come to a desert island under any species and by any means that God provides. God wishes only to be in Holy Communion with those who love him and cry out in genuine worship, and God's desire is that we should repent and live. One word spoken in love to God bids Love's reply, even if said while plunging to the earth in mortal sin. "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from before all time, for you repented, and I forgave you."

The parable tells us that God's kingdom is all about lavish and extravagant grace, or at least enough grace for everyone to be saved. So it should be among us who try to lead the life of the kingdom. When we come to Holy Communion, we each receive an identical piece of bread no matter who we are, our place in the church, or the amount of our pledge. All are welcome and all fed with grace enough for each. We are meant to give each other just enough forgiveness to keep us in the Communion of the church, for forgiveness is the only thing that holds us together. When we give alms, or time, or talent, we give what is needed, not what is fair, in order that grace may abound.

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