

Message: "The Unbalanced Scales of Grace"

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

20"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' ⁷They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, '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.' ¹³But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?' ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

I've shared a certain story with you before, and possibly in relation to this exact passage, but it's been a long time, and I can't think of a better entry into our deeper thinking on this passage. The story involved a young girl who had finally reached the age where her parents agreed that she could mow the neighbor's lawns for money. She was so excited that she went out right after they agreed and sought out the nearest neighbor whose lawn looked ready to be mowed for cash. It was two doors down; she pushed the mower up the street to the home, went up to the door and knocked. Her neighbor answered, to which the young girl made her sale's pitch. "Hello Mrs. Smith," she said, "Would you be willing to let me mow your lawn for pay?" Mrs. Smith was a very nice neighbor, and her lawn did need mowing, so she said, "I think that would be fine. How about twenty dollars?" Instantly the young girl frowned and looked down; Mrs. Smith wondered if she was out of touch with the going rate for lawn mowing these days. But then, when she was about to offer \$25, the young girl spoke up. "I don't think that will work," she said, "I only have ten dollars on me."

She was so excited to finally mow lawns that she expected to pay for the privilege and hadn't considered that most of the rest of the world thought the opposite. She had it completely backwards.

It's much like what we have in our scripture passages today - the parable Jesus shares seems to have the understanding of value completely backwards.

A landowner goes out in the morning to hire laborers to tend his vineyard; he finds some and they agree to a full day's work for a full day's wages. A little

later, the landowner sees more workers standing idle and invites them to work as well, offering to pay them, and I quote, "whatever is right." That's a very important change. He goes out like this at noon, at three o'clock, and at five o'clock, inviting them to work (the text doesn't say what he said to these later workers regarding pay....). All seems well, until the day is ended, and the landowner has the workers assemble for their pay. You can imagine a scene where all the workers were gathered before the landowner, who then deals first with those hired last - and gives them a full day's wages for an hour's work; next, those hired at 3 o'clock - and gives them a full day's wages for three hours work; and next, those hired at noon - and gives them a full day's wages for six hour's work.

You can almost hear the grumbling of the all-day workers growing, can't you? At this point, their thoughts must have been about the unfairness of those lesser workers receiving full pay - but there was another, possibly greater disappointment in store for them.

Finally, it is time to pay the full-day workers what they have earned; if we could ask any one of those workers what that amount would be I sense they would say something like time and a half or a full day's wages plus a good-faith bonus of 20% -- after all, they were the only ones do fulfill the requirements of a full day's work. How instant was their bitterness displayed when they received the same pay as the others. The scripture makes it clear -- ¹¹And when they received their pay, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, '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.'

Let's stop here for a moment to make an important point: Do you realize that this passage is probably one of the most anti-American work ethic messages there are in the Bible? I mean, what was Jesus thinking? How can he possibly give us a parable that goes against work-place ethics, against fair economic justice, against all the principles our labor worldview supports? Even back then, a day's pay for a day's work was standard; the offense of the full-day workers at the part-day workers seems absolutely rational.

But I'm not sure that's what Jesus is interested in here. I don't think Jesus is trying to present God's lack of work-place ethics, but to explain just how radical grace is. For that's what this passage and this parable is really all about - God's ridiculous grace.

I think passages like this stand out because of the shocking first impression of a ridiculous and backwards take on what we humans consider normal and

common-sense - but in our offense we are forced to take a closer and more intentional look at ourselves, especially at what we have become that may be far out of alignment with what God created us to be. And much of this has to do with the consideration of what makes us human in the face of a cold and cruel world - namely, our ability and willingness to embrace in our own lives the excessive grace that has the power to awaken the humanity we seem to often lose sight of as a species. It is grace that trades what is earned, for what is needed - and it is a trade sorely lacking in today's world.

Here is a good place for another illustration I've shared before, this time in the form of a cartoon. This is from *Dennis the Menace*; if you are not sure who that is, let it be known that my excuse is that I'm over sixty years old, and my age is showing! *Dennis the Menace* was a cartoon that featured a young boy Dennis who was - can you guess? - a menace, always making his parents roll their eyes and their neighbors wonder what's next and his teachers wondering what they did to deserve his antics.....in any event, Dennis was often in trouble and prone to stir things up in a negative although fairly innocent way. There was one exception to Dennis's reputation as a troublemaker to be avoided, and that was his neighbor Mrs. Wilson. Mr. Wilson couldn't stand the boy, but Mrs. Wilson took a liking to him in a grandmotherly sort of way. There's a cartoon scene out there somewhere that depicts Dennis and his friend Joey at Mrs. Olsen's table eating freshly made chocolate chip cookies and drinking chocolate milk she provided for them (a double-good snack if there ever was one!); while Mrs. Wilson has her back turned, Joey turns to Dennis and says, "Wow! Mrs. Wilson must really like us to give us such a good snack." But Dennis says something profound in response: "Mrs. Wilson doesn't give us cookies because we're nice, but because she's nice."

It is Mrs. Wilson's nature that stands out, not Dennis or Joey's merit; they know they don't deserve what she offers; but so does Mrs. Wilson, to whom that distinction doesn't matter.

How like God this is! It's what this parable and so many parts of the Bible are trying to get across - and it's a hard thing to get across. God's grace is excessive and irrational; Bishop Shelby Spong was fond of talking about the "wastefulness of God's grace," seeming to be wasteful to us who are addicted to measuring and balancing and assessing things as to our sense of justice and equity. But God will never be reigned in by such standards; God claims sovereignty over grace and employs it to wild extremes; there is no soul so lost, no life so broken, no heart so maligned, no mind so twisted, that God cannot work with what's before

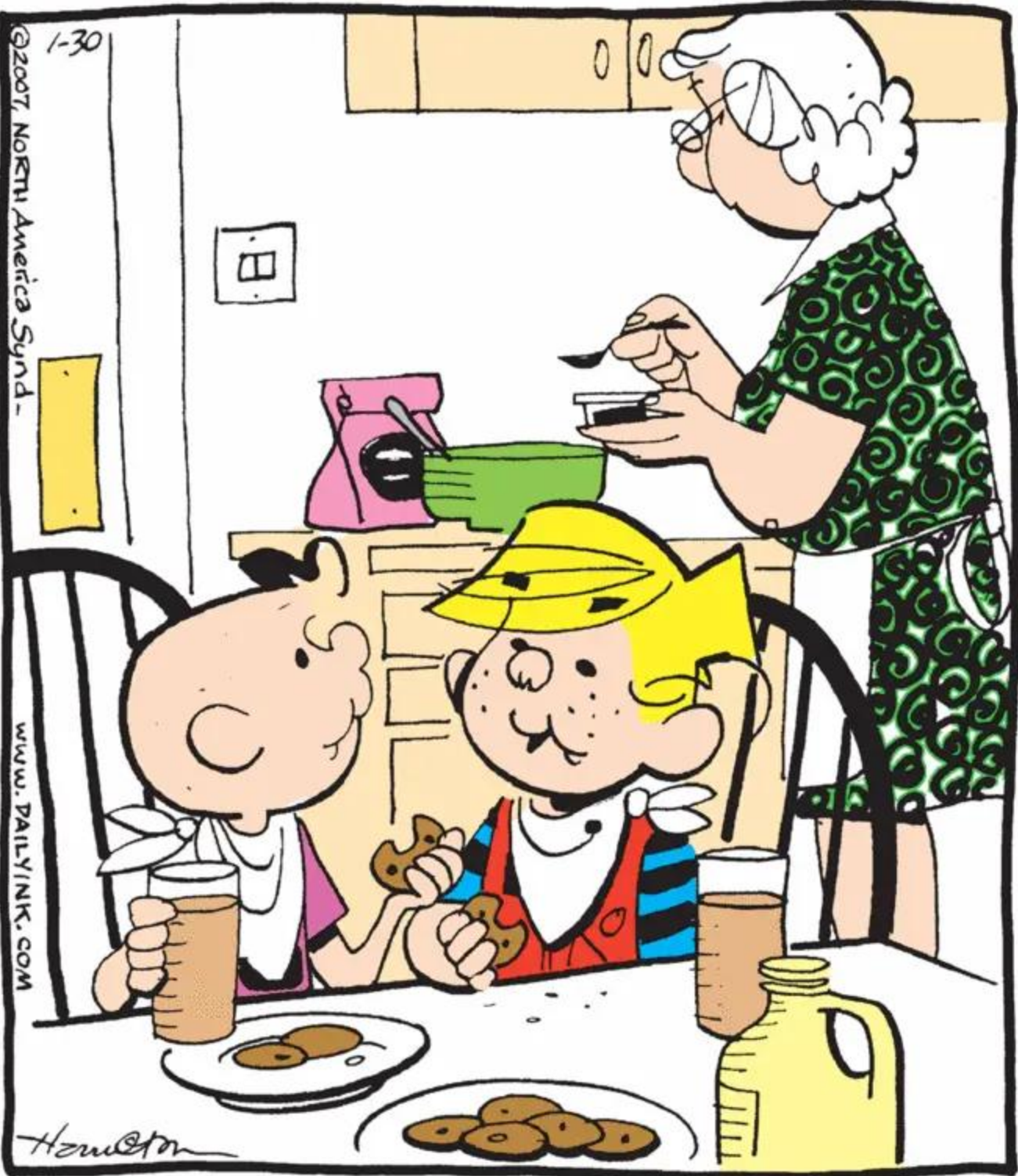
him. And God has chosen to do that work in a very particular way. The evidence of this parable is that God is never interested in what is deserved, but what is needed; he gives to the last as he does to the first, what each one of them needs regardless of the hours worked - a daily wage, enough to satisfy the daily needs of any person.

Amy Julia Becker is a guest opinion writer for national publications and hosts two podcasts: [Take the Next Step](#) and [Reimagining the Good Life](#). In a commentary she made on this parable, she says something quite profound - that the master isn't devaluing those he hired first but is elevating those he hired last. Do you hear the difference? Can you sense the radical grace in this? The God who places priorities on those left behind by society, the divine insistence that all are understood to be sacred, would naturally draw God's greater attention - and God's greater support? To provide what they need, without question of what they deserve based on human standards? This seems unfair only to those who base a person's worth on measurable quantities and see those measures crossed; envy is often the result, wanting not what one needs but what others have, losing sight of the needs of others in the process. We must remember that whenever envy replaces empathy, the heart becomes blind to grace.

I heard it said someplace that God's grace always involves the imposition of undeserved significance toward creation - in other words, God as God has the only say in how God behaves towards us, and miracle upon miracles, God has determined we are worth favoring; we are worth loving, forgiving, embracing, teaching, leading, and accompanying. Just as we are; regardless of our past histories or present status. God has deemed us worthy, something we cannot ever do on our own. And God invites us to see each other in the same way.

Which leads me to a concluding thought I'd like to share with you, a thought prompted by the parable of Jesus. And the thought is this: What would change if we, as a world, stopped trying to evaluate and assess someone's worth, and instead asked what they need? Not what they think they need, not what the world thinks they need, not even what we think they need, but what God says they need? We live in a world saturated with messages about what we need for life to be all it can be, messages such as what kind of car to drive, what kind of fashion to wear, what kind of music to listen to, what sort of groups to belong to, what type of career to pursue, what level of wealth to achieve, what sort of diet to consume, and what sort of community to live in - and all of these answers have a price tag attached to them. But what does God say we need that we can never

buy? What is the daily wage God offers to us all, whether we respond to God's claim upon our lives in the morning, or at noon, or even at the end of the day? What does God say we need which we can help each other to receive? The calculus of grace spends its time exclusively on such matters and has no time for notions of superiority; the grace of God always concentrates on what people need - and invites us to do the same.



"MRS. WILSON HELPS US MEET OUR DAILY REQUIREMENT OF COOKIES AND MILK!"