

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Uncalculating Love”**

Rev. David K. Groth

Sept. 18, 2011

*“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity” (Mt. 20:15)?*

One of the hardest things for us to understand is how God can love all human beings, all of them, with the same unlimited love. It seems instinctive to believe that though he might love the world, still he loves some a little more than others, the good ones, the obedient ones, the chosen ones. But Augustine said (and I think he’s right), God loves each of us as if there were only one of us to love.

Every child, I think, wonders how it is that parents can love more than one child equally. Birth order may have something to do with it. My older brothers assume that as the youngest, I was spoiled. I see it differently. When oldest brother Andy was born, he was treated like porcelain, second brother Paul like corning ware, and I, I was treated like Tupperware. When Andy was born mom and dad nearly had to build an addition to house all the photographs of him. I think there may be a couple of photos of me lying around, one of which was free, provided by the hospital. And my personal favorite: when your first baby drops a pacifier, you boil it for twelve minutes. With the second baby, you lick it off and reinsert. With the third baby’s pacifier, you tell the dog to go fetch! It can also be difficult for us to understand how God could love each of us equally.

It must have been late in their life together, near the end in fact, when one of the disciples finally asks what all were thinking. The twelve had followed him up and down Galilee for three years. They had walked away from their families and jobs, away from the comfort of home and routine. They had gone hungry, slept on the ground, been cold and tired. And now he’s decided to go to Jerusalem, and they’re not sure they’re going to make it out alive. The twelve have given quite a bit, actually, sacrificing everything for him. And they’re wondering how their sacrifices might be rewarded one day. In the verses just before our text, he’s talking about heaven (who gets in, who doesn’t), and so the disciples are wondering what their reward will be given their long service.

It’s Peter, of course, who says what they’re all thinking. Peter always does that. There’s not so much as a speed bump between his brain and his lips. In fact, I think that’s one of the reasons why Jesus called him to be a disciple. Confirmation classes, I know, are always more interesting and fun when you have one guy in there, someone like Peter who blurts out whatever he’s thinking. Sometimes it’s exasperating; but often the detour, the teachable moment is just what the class needs. In any event, Peter says to Jesus, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (Mt. 19:27). That is, what will we get in return? Surely there’s a little more for us than for the “Johnny Come Latelys.” Jesus answers with a parable.

The owner of a vineyard goes to the town square where laborers gather everyday looking for work. This landowner has a harvest of grapes that are ready. With grapes, timing is everything. He needs workers today, not the day after tomorrow. And he needs a lot of them. So at sunrise, 6:00 a.m. he is already in town hiring everyone in sight. But the harvest is large; the work is slow, so he returns to the labor market at 9:00 a.m. and hires another group of workers. At noon and 3:00 he's back again, hiring a third and fourth group. And at 5:00 (just an hour before quitting time), he hires yet a fifth group.

At quitting time the workers line up to be paid. The owner begins with the last group hired. Surprisingly, they receive a full day's pay, even though they were in the vineyard just an hour. He pays them in full view of everyone else. They, of course, are delighted, and grateful. I know who else is delighted: all the other laborers. They know if these people who worked just an hour received a full day's wages, then they, who worked all day, from dawn, through the blazing heat of midday . . . they who did most of the work, surely they're going to receive a big, fat bonus. And so when their turn comes to be paid, they can hardly believe their eyes. They receive the same amount as those who worked just an hour. They received a full day's pay, but not a penny more, and they're not happy about it, not at all. "It's not fair" they say. "You've made them equal to us. We worked all day under the sun. They worked an hour" to which the owner responds, "Take what you have and go. It's my money. I can do with it as I please."

We can sympathize with those all-day workers can't we? Maybe we've even experienced a bit of their grievance. In summers during college, I worked for the Delavan School District. We painted classrooms and bathrooms and did roof work and the like. It quickly became apparent the college boys did the bulk of the work, while the grizzled veterans, Butch and Benny, slept in the truck . . . or went on a frivolous errand to Barker Lumber and spent a good long time there chewing the fat with Ted and Chuck and the boys. I still resent it! That's the bitterness of the all day laborers in the parable. No parable makes me feel more like a legalistic Pharisee than this one. That those who barely broke a sweat are paid the same as those with broken blisters, it's not fair!

By the way, anyone who takes this parable as a practical basis for employment would soon be out of business. But it's not about running a business. It's about grace. That's what the all day laborers are grumbling about, isn't it? They're grumbling about grace . . . about some receiving what they did not earn. They're grumbling about the uncalculating generosity of God.

Most of us grew up with the idea lurking somewhere that God is a bean counter, carefully keeping track of what we've done or failed to do, rewarding or punishing us accordingly, and gearing up to do that in a big way on the Last Day. But in this strange story, God is not keeping score. God is not a fussy accountant keeping books, making entries on the basis of merit accumulated. God's system is based on something other than performance, something other than works, and it confronts and contradicts much of what we assume about God. This owner doesn't settle accounts based on what the workers did. He settles them on the basis of his generosity, his grace. The rewards of God are not proportionate to human effort. The God who lavishly clothes the flowers and feeds the birds delights to give his servants far more than they could ever earn.

By the way, there's a similar parable in rabbinic tradition, (tradition of the Jewish rabbis) where God will give Israel a large reward for their long work for him, but the Gentiles who have only worked a little will receive a small reward. That makes more sense to us but it's not grace. There's also an early fourth century rabbinic parable in which one man who worked only two hours is given the same pay as those who worked all day, but at the end of the parable we learn it's because he accomplished more in two hours than they did in a whole day! Again, *that* makes sense to us, but it is not grace.

There's always something new to think about in these ancient texts. This time around I found myself thinking about that last group of laborers. They are unemployed, day laborers. There are no government safety nets for the unemployed. In that culture, no work meant no food for the family. "Why are you standing here?" the owner asks them. It's at least possible they were the least desirable workers to hire, too old, or too young or too crippled. "You also go into the vineyard" the owner says. "There's work for you. I need you out there." It's not so much a good financial deal for owner given what he's going to pay them. And it's unlikely the owner really *needed* the extra workers for just an hour. I think this was an act of compassion. Apparently, the owner cares more about the unemployed and the marginal people than he does his profit margin. He cares about the left-over kids on the ball field whom nobody wants on the team. Not only does he pay them what they haven't earned, but in hiring them, he gives them purpose. Commercially, the owner is a fool. And God is as uncalculating as that.

But it begs the question: Does this whole idea of grace mean that we don't even have to try? Does it mean we don't have to bother with painful sacrifice, with lowly service, with messy evangelism, with annoying obedience? If we all get equal pay, why not just coast and be happy?

You know the answer. This grace is costly. It cost Jesus the anguish of the cross, the abandonment, the curse of God. This grace cost him his life. There's nothing cheap or easy about grace, even for God's Son. Therefore, our response to this grace should not be cheap or easy. We cheapen his grace when we decide we're not going to work very long or hard in the vineyard. We cheapen his grace, when we receive it, but then coast, with little regard for his commandments, with an undisciplined worship and prayer life, with a *laizze faire*, take it or leave it attitude toward God's Word and Sacrament. We cheapen his grace when we don't allow gratitude to pervade our lives. We cheapen his grace, when we confess it with our tongues, but then go out the rest of the week and try to earn it. We can cheapen his grace with our money, with the assumption we can make him love us more by giving him more. But it cuts the other way too. We cheapen his grace when we cheerfully splurge on frivolous fineries for our closets and castles, but then get tight and miserly and thoughtless when it's time to make an offering.

And this is important: *We cheapen his grace when we think it's mostly about inclusiveness and acceptance.* What you do or don't do *does* matter, also to God. Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery, but he also said, "Go and sin no more." Jesus offered the waters welling up to eternal life to the Samaritan woman at the well and then told her to "Go, call your husband, and then come back." The woman answered "I have no husband" to which Jesus said, "You're right. You've had five, and the man you're

now living with is not your husband.” He’s not accepting her status quo, is he? The Prodigal Son got up the morning after his welcome home party and I think Dad expected him to be at work in the field with his older brother. And if that one sheep out of a hundred keeps wandering off day after day, you know which one the shepherd is going to pick when it comes time for Passover sacrifice. The wandering husband is redeemed not simply by receiving him back, but when he’s expected to rejoin the marriage with all its responsibilities. A man knows he’s been forgiven not when his wife is all sweet and kind, but when she throws the dish towel at him and says, “OK buster, it’s your turn to dry.” The laborers who were hired at 5:00 pm for an hour now have the opportunity to go to work the next day at 6:00 *am*. Paul writes in the Epistle, “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27). Grace is about much more than just God accepting us as we are. That’s rubbish. Grace makes us want to be better than we are.

Finally, this parable was not the answer Peter and the others wanted to hear, was it. They were hoping for a big-time bonus in heaven for all their hard work on earth. What they learned is the blessing of eternal life is the same for all. Some are not more saved than others. So if you think yourself like the all day worker, this is not a good news parable. But if you know you’re one of those one hour workers and the owner has just blessed you with way more than you earned, then this parable is great news.

Truth is we are all one hour workers! On the Last Day we will be given far more, immeasurably more than we earned. With our little time here on earth we could never earn eternal life. There’s not time enough under the sun. So what great difference is there between a drop of work and a thimble full of work, when compared to the vast ocean? So then, whether we’ve been out in the vineyard all the day long, or for just the last hour, the only response possible is to praise and thank him, serve and obey him. Amen.