

Sermon: The Maddening Graciousness of God**Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: September 20, 2026**

The UCC pastor in Valley Forge, PA. Rev. Nathaniel Mahlberg shares his family's ancestral story of how they came from Sweden to make a home in America. His great great grandfather in Sweden encountered a representative of the American Railroad Company who was recruiting workers in Europe to build the railroad across the US after the Civil War. The company promised that they would not only pay well, but because of the Homestead Act they would receive a plot of good farmland which would be theirs upon which to build a livelihood. Rev. Mahlberg's great great grandfather signed up and told his wife that he would send money and directions for her and their family to come over once he was established, which is exactly what he eventually did. That's the family story of how they came to America, the land of opportunity, the land of dreams.

Rev. Mahlberg, though, explains that it wasn't until later in his adult life that he learned the larger story within which his family's story sits. After the Civil War, the US Government sent the army out West to stomp out the resistance of indigenous people to westward expansion - the Apache, Navaja, Ute and Sioux among others. The Sioux or the Dakota people were conquered by the US Army in a brutal reprisal for their efforts to stay on their land and they were eventually exiled to the worst of South Dakota land, now known as Pine Ridge Reservation (where we went this summer for our service learning trip... to build outhouses for them, nice eh?). It was after that brutal removal of the indigenous people that the US Government

expressly stated they wanted solid Nordic blooded people to populate the lands taken from the Dakota. They believed that Northern Europeans were racially superior so they had the railroad companies aggressively recruit people like Rev. Mahlberg's grandparents. Now Mexican, African, Chinese, workers were also recruited to work the rails but, as you might imagine, they did not get a piece of land offered to them or nearly as much money and in fact received deals that kept them in indentured servitude. Rev. Mahlberg says "my ancestors were modest, honest, faithful and hardworking and all this does not take away from that, but they were offered advantages from the start that they did nothing to deserve and it simply wasn't fair. Racism, actually, cut our way for us..."¹ and was how our country was formed. We want to believe the innocent and white-washed narrative of our heritage and our country's founding and our current Administration wants us to believe the white-washed lies as well so that white people can maintain their hegemony over this land. But people like Rev. Mahlberg who are willing to look honestly at their own checkered family stories, and for that matter, churches like Old South in Boston who are confronting how their history is interwoven with slavery, are doing critical work of truth-telling from their humble personal stories. It's the best way to confront the lies proliferating today... to become all the more committed to telling the truth in our small areas of influence.

This was Jesus' MO. He went to the small stories to point to much deeper, much larger issues. Through his parables he told what seemed at first to be nice little family stories... of a father and two sons and of a shepherd with 100 sheep and a woman sweeping her house and a

¹ From Mahlerg's September 24, 2017 Sermon "Parable of the Immigrant Day Laborers" from his website Nathanielmahlberg.com

wounded man at the road side and on more than a few occasions stories about workers in fields and vineyards and on estates. These were not random settings for quaint stories to help people think about what heaven will be like when they die. These were volatile this-worldly settings that Jesus chose to talk about and make the subject for his articulation of what the Kingdom of heaven was like. Jesus was fully aware of the tension between landowner and tenants, most of whose lands were stolen by Rome in order to dominate and control them. Jesus wasn't naive about how strongly people felt about their lands being occupied by Rome and then being taxed to death. Jesus certainly knew what he was doing when he spoke of workers and wages and laborers, and how they were powderkegs of resentment and frustration, about to blow... which it did about 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection in a devastating Jewish revolt against the empire at the time. Jerusalem was destroyed.

So when Jesus said to the people listening around him, "do you want to know what the Kingdom of God is like"? He did not say "It's like a great Roman Palace with gold pillars and tables piled with food and drink." Nor does he point up to the sky and say "The kingdom of God is like a bright blue sky with soft puffy white clouds with angels sitting on them playing harps and a choir singing glorious praises to God." No, Jesus goes to hungry day laborers standing around the marketplace desperate for some work to feed their hungry families. The Kingdom of heaven is like this. He invites people not to an interior place of peace and stillness and contentment but actually goes to jagged places of pain, frustration, resentment, really sore places, and says, "here, listen, this oughtta give you some sense of the Kingdom of Heaven: a landowner comes for his day

workers.” And his listeners, who are decidedly NOT of the landowning class, immediately give him their attention, albeit, with their hackles up.

And the landowner chooses, FIRST, the good nordic stock of the group, you might say, standing there on the corner of the marketplace, looking for work. He chooses the strongest, the most alert, the youngest probably of them, hires them for the day at an agreed upon price and brings them to work in his vineyard. A few hours later he comes back to the marketplace and there is a group of them still standing there hoping for work and he hires them, same deal. A few hours later, he comes back and gets more and then again. Each time, it's worth noting, those he hires would have been weaker ones, older ones, the less desirable ones still standing there passed over many times. And then, get this, with only one hour left in the work day he goes again and there are still people standing there waiting, the losers, the leftovers, the last, the least, standing there, probably ashamed, hoping beyond hope that they might even get an hour's worth of work. And the landowner hires them too. Actually, first the landowner asks them “Why are you still standing here doing no work?” To which one of the remaining workers says “Because no one has hired us.”

The punchline of the story comes at the end of the day when the landowner goes to pay his workers and intentionally he gives the late comers, those who came at the 11th hour – which is where we get that expression by the way - the pay he promised to the whole group and then progressively he pays all those he hired across the course of the day, the same amount. As you can imagine and understand, those who worked all day are pretty upset that they get the same wages as those who worked one hour, to which the landowner has little sympathy and says “hey, it's my money I can do what I want, can't I?” And Jesus ends his little maddening

tale with the great and famous line - “so the last will be first and the first will be last.”²

This is what Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like. It's like... unfair, I guess. The kingdom of heaven is unfair. The people who hardly worked got as much as those who worked all day.

But that's one perspective from those who felt they were deserving of more and that the late-comers were less deserving of what they got. No one says we have to take that perspective or identify with them. We could just as easily see it from the other end of the story, from the latecomers perspective, the 11th hour people, and we could have thought “Haha, THAT IS AWESOME! The Kingdom of God is the best! Generous and gracious and overflowing in abundance! Hooray!!”

That's the power of Jesus' little innocent family stories. They catch the listener unaware and before you know it you're implicated in the story, and it calls on the carpet, usually, our hardheartedness. It's a quintessential American parable in many ways, this one is, which Jesus tells about 1600 years before the US came to be by wiping out Indigenous people and enslaving African people. The myths of American individualism, the American dream, how you can pull yourself up by the bootstraps, make your own destiny and all that, this parable stands in the face of. It's a real offense to it actually. What do you mean the kingdom of heaven is like someone who doesn't work much and gets the same amount of money as the hardworking person? Sounds dangerously like some kind of socialism or communism if you apply it to this world. So American Christianity, which is its own distinct thing, says that Jesus is not talking about this world,

² Matthew 20:16

actually, and arrangements here, but he's talking about the next world, after death! Yeah, that must be what he's doing, Heaven away up there!

But the thing is, he's not. There's nothing in the Gospels that says that Jesus' parables are about an afterworld existence. Jesus' parables are not about heaven after you die at all. They are clearly and intentionally about the kingdom of God as it intersects and influences and shines through this world in the here and in the now!

And there's this common thread that comes through all these parables. The listener caught out by his parables is the one with a darkened and hardened heart standing there resenting the graciousness of God toward others. It's like Jonah telling God he in no way wants to go and warn Ninevah of their coming disasters because he knows they'll repent and then get off scot-free. It's the older brother standing out in the field seething as he notices the lights on in the house and the fatted calf killed for a party for his awful brother. It's the 99 sheep who have always done what is right and appropriate standing there watching the shepherd bound over the hill toward the one idiot sheep who keeps wandering off and causing trouble for the whole group. You hear it? You hear the theme? God's grace and graciousness is maddening to those who frame things as a meritocracy and believe they deserve more than others, those who are good at keeping the ledger and tallying up who is better and who is right and who deserves what. While on the other end, to those receiving grace... it's quite frankly, amazing.

But here's the mic drop. In relation to God we are all the 11th hour people. In relation to God we are all the late-comers, all undeserving of the grace given us to even be alive.

Considering the stories told of America, how dare we of European descent claim that immigrants don't belong here like we do, after what we did to the original inhabitants of this land? How dare we humans use up the land and the resources of this earth without a care for what it does to habitats and species and the poor, when we humans are the late comers to this earth party. How dare we who have so much - actually quite a bit more than we even and ever could need and use and who have had every privilege in this white privilege society - take issue with those who benefit from affirmative action and DEI and government assistance. We live in a land of opportunity for some, less for others, and no opportunity for many.

So to be fair and honest, what is required of us, asked of us as follower of Jesus and listeners to his parables is this - we must put away the ledger and not speak of deserving and see that before the God of Grace and God of Glory, we are all the latecomers, we are all the lazy ones, the last, the least, the losers, and it's the grace of God that blesses each of us and all of us regardless of our deserving.

We have a religion that is really an anti-religion. Religion across human history has traditionally been about what we must do and not do to get what we need and want out of a power outside of ourselves. Let's sacrifice this for a good harvest and do that for victory in war and not do this for whatever other outcome we want. And if Christianity is about anything, it's about NOT that. It's not about what we do and don't do to be deserving of goodies and grace from God, but it's about what God does for us, out of God's grace, period. That's worth saying again and again cause, I don't know about you, but it doesn't get through my thick skull very easily. Christianity is not about what we do and don't do to be deserving of goodies and grace from God, but it's about what God does for us, out of

God's grace, despite us, period. And even after Jesus tells us this and tells a ton of stories about this and dies for this purpose on the cross we still have trouble accepting it. We still too often want that ledger kept and for us to be on the right side of the ledger and for certain others to be on the other side of the ledger.

The writer and Episcopal pastor Robert Farrar Capon says heaven is filled with forgiven sinners and Hell is filled with forgiven sinners. The only difference is that the people in hell don't want to accept the forgiveness, don't feel they need it, but instead feel like they deserve something more.³ And you don't have to posit heaven and hell as afterlife realities either. It's the same reality in the here and now - heaven is reserved for those who have put away the ledger and gratefully received what is beautifully given in this life and hell is reserved for those who believe they deserve more and are furious or disgusted with those who they believe are undeserving.

And here is what's really maddening - those who have so much and believe they are more deserving than everyone else - God loves them too and God's grace and forgiveness is bestowed upon them as well. The ledger must be put away, in the end, it's all and only love. We are blessed and our job in this life, in this world, in our small circles is to make of our lives a blessing to others.

³ Capon, Robert Farrar, *The Parables of Judgement*, Eerdmann's Publishing Co: Michigan, 1989, p. 45