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## Everyone is Invited

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I'm going to borrow a sermon illustration from the well-known Methodist minister and author, William Willimon. I've tinkered with it a little, and I think this illustration will help us enter into Jesus' parable. You'll need to use your imaginations. And, college students, this exercise should be especially easy for you.

Pretend that you're in college and it's the first day of the fall semester. You're in math class (I would have dreaded this class), and your professor says, "Today I'm going to give you an extremely complicated math problem to solve, and your ability to solve it will constitute your grade for the class. I'm giving you this problem now so you'll have all semester to work on it." And the professor's voice takes on a more serious tone, "And I want *all of you* to make an A in my class."

Pretend that you want to do well in this class. You want to make that A as much as your professor wants you to. So, you immediately begin working on the math problem. You go to the library again and again to consult helpful books. You spend hours surfing the web for clues. Finally, you begin calculating.

You notice as the fall semester moves along that several of your classmates aren't taking the math problem very seriously. It's late October and they haven't done any work, and they

don't seem the least bit worried about this. You think to yourself, "Slackers. They *should* be worried. They'll be sorry when December rolls along."

You continue solving the problem. You even spend your Thanksgiving break working on the assignment when you could have gone home and feasted on turkey and stuffing and green bean casserole, and the amazing pies your mother makes. Instead, you spend your time in the library working and eating vending machine food. But it pays off, because the week before finals week comes along and you're putting the finishing touches on your work, double-checking everything, tweaking things that need to be tweaked.

And in your math class that week you overhear some of your classmates talking about how they'll have to pull a couple of all-nighters to get the problem solved because they still haven't started working on it. They're even cracking jokes about this. Again you think, "Slackers. They'll be sorry next week because there's no way they can solve the problem now." I mean, after all, you're really bright and it's taken you all semester to get the work done.

Well, the last day of classes finally arrives. You're feeling good as you walk to math class. You're confident that you'll get that A. And when you arrive you turn in your work, and to your surprise so do all of your classmates. *Even the slackers.* You think to yourself, "How did they do it? It's impossible!"

And then you overhear some of your classmates talking to the professor. "Dr. Mayes, thanks for helping me. I never would have been able to solve the problem if you hadn't given me the answer." Dr. Mayes pats her on the back and says, "No problem." Another says to the professor, "Well, here it is. Thanks for coming by the library yesterday to help me." Dr. Mayes nods and smiles at him. Then another says, "Thanks for coming by my dorm room last night. You're a lifesaver!" On and on this goes.

Imagine what you're feeling at this point. You've been working on this awful math problem all semester long, figuring it out on your own, going without sleep some nights to get the work done. And all the while this professor of yours has been parading around campus giving everyone the answer. Well, almost everyone. Dr. Mayes never came by *your* dorm room.

Now, I don't know about you, but I'd be really upset. Let's pretend you're upset too. And you decide tell Dr. Mayes off. And she says back to you, "Why are you upset? I said on the first day of class that I wanted all of you to make an A. You were able to get an A on your own, and that's great! But some of your classmates needed help; they needed some special attention. So, you got an A, and they got an A. Are you envious because I'm generous?"

You stand there stunned. You know the answer to her question should be "No, I'm not envious because you're generous," but it's really hard to get these words out, because the professor's generosity doesn't feel like generosity *to you*. You really wanted an A, but now that everyone has the same grade you're A doesn't *feel* like an A.

And this feeling helps us enter into Jesus' parable. Everyone in his story gets a denarius for their work, or an A so to speak. Some of the workers in the parable are out in the vineyard all day long, doing back-breaking work in the scorching heat. Some workers only work a few hours. And others only one hour. Yet, everyone gets the same amount of pay! It doesn't seem fair, does it? It just doesn't seem like things should work this way.

Think about it. Many of us would say that it's unfair for a manager of a business to get the same Christmas bonus as a temp. It's unfair for someone who's been doing great work at a company for ten years to lose a promotion to someone who's only been with the company a few months. It's unfair for someone who's devoted their entire life to serving God to receive all that

there is to receive from God *after* a murderous thief who only yesterday had an epiphany about God. It's outrageous, right? Not according to Jesus' parable.

I wonder if the first disciples struggled with this parable too. Before Jesus tells this story he's confronted by a young man who wants to know what he has to do to receive eternal life. Jesus tells him to sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor. The young man goes away grieving because he's rich, and the disciples are shocked by this encounter between Jesus and the wealthy man. They even say to Jesus, "Who can be saved?" And, Jesus goes on to tell this parable.

Now, I don't think Jesus tells the rich man to sell his possessions because Jesus thinks wealth is an evil thing in and of itself. Rather, Jesus tells the man to give up what he relies on most in this world so that his relationship with God can take its place.

And Jesus tells this parable about the laborers in the vineyard to his disciples to further illustrate the need for us to give up anything that stands in the way of receiving heaven. And as I read this parable it seems to me that pride and envy are in heaven's way. Jesus is challenging us to throw off the shackles of the ego – to rid ourselves of our burning desire to stand out from others. We're invited to let go of our deep-seated need to get what we think we're worth. And we're asked to not feel jealous and resentful when others get *more* than we think they're worth. And this is difficult for many of us to do.

It's difficult because we humans want to give people what we think they *deserve*. That's the way our generosity tends to work. But, God's generosity is unlike ours. The human heart and the Divine Heart beat in very different ways.

God's generosity is amazingly abundant, endlessly overflowing, all-encompassing, because the Divine Heart is selfless, giving, and forgiving. And the human heart needs God's

grace in order for it to beat like the Divine Heart. And, God's grace is a gift – a gift that can't be earned. A gift that *each and every one of us* stands in need of.

Notice in our parable this morning that it isn't the manager of the vineyard who goes out seeking workers. It's the landowner who's out there time and time again searching for laborers, tirelessly inviting them to receive all that there is to receive. And this is the good news - God's grace is inexhaustible!

But it's hard to believe in feast instead of famine. It's hard to trust in abundance instead of scarcity. And our lack of faith in God's endless supply of grace is what makes it difficult for us to rejoice when we see grace at work in the life of someone we think is undeserving. Maybe it's hard for us to celebrate grace because the world tells us there's not enough of anything really to go around. It's every person for themselves; it's survival of the fittest. And we buy into this kind of thinking and miss Jesus' point. Let's try to think about grace in a different way. How much music can a piano make? And if there are more pianos is there less music to go around? Or, how much love can you parents have for a child? And for those with two children, does each child only receive half of your love? *No*.

Likewise, there's no limit to God's love and generosity. There are no lengths to which the landowner will not go to find us, and invite us to receive all that there is to receive. And thank goodness for this! Thank goodness God is doing this. Imagine how terrible it would be if humans were in charge of God's grace. People might be excluded from receiving all that there is to receive from God because of the color of their skin, or because of their gender, or sexual orientation, or social status. On and on the list would go. Thank goodness God decides how much to give and to whom it will be given. And thank goodness there's no limit to God's

generosity. *Everyone* gets an A. *Everyone* gets a denarius. *Everyone* is invited to receive all that there is to receive from God.

Here's the hard part - can we accept that God's grace works in such radical ways? Or will we out of pride and envy turn our backs on God's generosity and walk away grumbling like some of the laborers in our parable? Will we turn our backs on heaven itself? You see, the landowner's final question in the parable is directed at you and me, and it's a tough one. "*Are you envious because I am generous?*" I pray we can answer this question with a heartfelt, "No." And I pray that we're able to celebrate grace every time we see it at work in a person's life, regardless of who that person is, or where they've come from, *or what they've done*. My prayer is that we will come to value others the way God values them, that we will love others the way God loves them.

Friends, I leave you with a quote from the author George Wendell Knight. He says, "When a person works an eight hour day and receives a fair day's pay for their time; that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for their performance; that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for their long service or high achievements; that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award – yet receives such a gift anyway – that is a good picture of God's unmerited favor. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God." Thanks be to God. Amen.