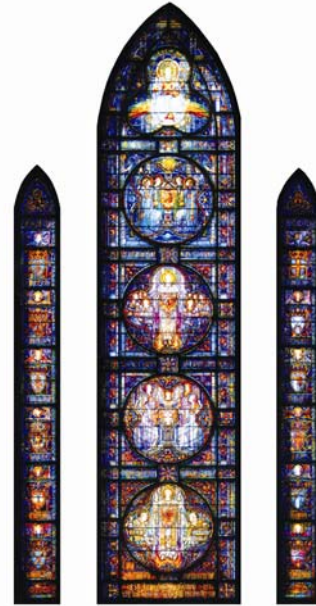


March 6, 2011

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

## Sermons



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### **“Not What We Expected”**

The Reverend John S. Shonle

#### **Matthew 20:1-16**

My friends, the Good News of Jesus Christ is that God loves you; and God loves your neighbor as well. The scope of God's love, the magnitude of God's love is beyond what you expect. It takes some adjusting in fact, to understand and act.

What I don't like about today's parable is how easy it is to find myself on the wrong side of it. I mean, OK, I'm one of those workers who started early. I agree to \$50.00 for a day's work. I worked all day. I worked in the heat of the day. I don't know if I'm the only one here, but I've actually done agricultural work in Israel. I was in my twenties and I was on a kibbutz for 30 days. It gets hot. They call it 40 degrees Centigrade, but in "real" degrees we're talking over 100. It's hot doing agricultural work out there.

So I can imagine working in the heat. Some other workers join in the middle of the day and then, as the sun is starting to go down around 5:00 p.m., these late-comers come in. I can imagine watching all of this. Seeing people line up for their pay and seeing these people who just worked an hour, getting \$50.00. I am thinking "jackpot!" It's going to be my kind of pay-day today. It's my turn and I get . . . \$50.00. Wait a minute! This isn't fair. I can imagine people reacting that way. I can imagine me reacting that way.

I read of an experiment that was done with monkeys. They would give these monkeys different kinds of treats and each monkey could see what the next one got. They gave the first monkey a piece of carrot which, as monkey treats go, is kind of "meh." The second monkey would get a grape which, as monkey treats go, is pretty much the Mercedes Benz of treats. When the first monkey sees that the second monkey gets a grape, it gets angry, sometimes even throwing down the carrot. It seems that monkeys have an innate sense of fairness.

I think our sense of what is fair and what is not fair is possibly deeply hard-wired in the human brain. It seems to me this whole business of what is "fair;" this business of what a person "deserves" or doesn't "deserve", and for that matter the whole business of "rewards" and "punishments" is more a product of our "monkey brains" than of our spiritual hearts.

My friends, Jesus came to enlarge our spiritual hearts. If the product of the "monkey brain" is judgment, then the product of the spiritual heart is grace. And Jesus came that grace may abound!

I once knew a pastor who was a former union line-man. I realize here at Westminster the sympathies may be more toward management than unions, but bear with me. I asked this former union line-man, what his perspective was on this parable. Would this kind of thing really happen and what would be the union response? I imagined there would be all of these lengthy rules regarding seniority and who was allowed to do what labor.

The former union line-man said this in fact does happen. It might be the case that he would go to the union shop early in the day and get a particular assignment and another person might go later in the day and get the same assignment. At the end of the day, they would each be paid for the job instead of the hours. They would get equal pay. I asked, "Isn't that frustrating that you worked the whole day and got the same pay as someone who just came in for a couple of hours?" And he answered, "No, because I would realize that next time, it could be me who got to work the shorter hours." That sums up the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The question for the religious community is this: are we going to act more like monkeys or more like good union men and women?

I believe Jesus was addressing the parable today to the religious community. Folks like the Pharisees who worked hard to be religious. Who followed the rules that supposedly would please God. It is ironic in fact, that all their effort was ultimately misplaced according to Jesus. They were struggling to obey the minutia of the law but neglecting the greater responsibilities including mercy and justice. The religious folks were upset that Jesus was teaching that God loved the prostitutes and tax collectors just as much as God loved them. "What? You are making them our equals?" God answers "I can do what I will do. Are you jealous of my generosity?"

I think this whole business of religious hierarchy, the drawing of lines in the sand, the declaring who is in God's favor and who is out of God's favor is just more "monkey brain" business. Jesus came to enlarge our spiritual hearts.

The danger of the Christian religion is that it is easy to get wrapped up in the particulars, in doctrine and in religious practice. That following Jesus Christ is first of all about grace, kindness and generosity. We ourselves are recipients of grace. Are we going to forget this? Are we going to be offended if this same grace is shown to other people? Are we going to be jealous of God's favor?

It's funny how the church tends to target specific groups of supposed sinners, people who the church says God hates. In fact, it seems Jesus spent more time criticizing religious folks than he did criticizing specific groups of sinners.

If God hates anything, it's this bogus sense of religiosity; this arrogant sense of spiritual entitlement. Jesus came to enlarge our spiritual hearts. Jesus came that grace may abound.

We expect things to work a certain way, the way our "monkey brains" say they should work. Jesus came to teach another way. A way we didn't expect.

I recently finished teaching a six week adult Sunday school class on homosexuality in the Bible and the church. (Sandy started me off with something easy.) What was particularly interesting about the class was that we had a couple of people who were clearly struggling with the issue. I'm sure that if you had asked them 10 or 20 years ago if they expected we would even be discussing this now, they would have said "no." Things don't always work out as we expect them to.

For that matter, in the course of teaching the class, I realized I actually have some room to grow in understanding this topic. That's not at all what I expected, but it was very cool to realize.

I am not going to publicly address that topic from the pulpit, I figure I need to build up some more good will first. I will mention, as far as the overall various controversies in the church go, the question ought not be who is right and who is wrong but rather, can we deal with these things graciously?

Did Jesus come to settle the argument once and for all? Did Jesus come so that we could be right? Or did Jesus come so that grace may abound?

When you grow up in this world my friends, grace is not what you expect. You get used to winners and losers; to right and wrong; to the haves and the have-nots; you get used to the idea that people either deserve it or they don't.

Jesus came so you could see things differently; imagine things differently; and do things differently. Jesus came to enlarge our spiritual hearts and that grace may abound.

For that matter, the world does not always work the way you think it should. Some of you are dealing with things right now you didn't expect to deal with or perhaps, you don't want to deal with. Serious illness, either your own or a loved ones. A job loss, either your own or someone close to you. Maybe you are dealing with the loss of a meaningful relationship. Maybe you are just dealing with a change that you did not expect. I hear it again and again: "This is not what I expected at this point in my life."

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that God's love is not dependent on circumstances. God loves you. You are connected, whatever is happening.

This is the other side of grace, that nothing can separate you from the love of God. It is as Paul wrote in Romans Chapter 8: <sup>35</sup>“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship; or distress, or persecution, or famine, nakedness, or peril, or sword?” <sup>38</sup>“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And God help the church if it tries to separate people from this love.

Sometimes I think religion is a pretty strange vessel to contain grace. But the thing is, you cannot contain grace. Grace always overflows.

To hear some Christians tell it, their God seems sort of small. Their portion of grace, quite limited. Enough grace to cover me, but not enough to cover you folks over there. Yes, I'm pointing at the balcony, and yes, I am kidding.

Could it be that God's grace stretches all the way up to the balcony? Could it be that God's grace stretches outside these church walls? Could it be? Could it be? Jesus revealed a BIG God. Jesus revealed an overflowing grace.

Let's put our heads together and ponder the implications of this BIG God. This overflowing grace. Let's raise our hands together and act in its accord.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that God loves you; and God loves your neighbor as well. And the scope of God's love, the magnitude of God's love is beyond what you expect. It takes some adjusting, in fact, to understand and act.

Jesus came that our spiritual hearts may grow. Jesus came that grace may abound. Thanks be to God. Amen.