

The Kind of Love that Baffles

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
September 20, 2020
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Toiling long hours for pittance of pay. Waiting in line... no, correction... actually coming to the realization that I am at the *back of the line!*

This parable of Jesus is outlandish! Another absurd story that pushes the limits of what we deem acceptable. For the landowner in the story puts us over the edge when he tells the manager to first pay the labourers who have hardly worked. The workers who have been out in the vineyard the entire day have to watch those who hardly broke a sweat get paid first. One denarius for you. A denarius for you. That denarius would barely sustain one person, certainly not a family.

Resist the temptation to read this literally. Capture the spirit, the mood, the lesson of this parable for you.

Imagine standing in line. Where are you in that line? Are you the physically and emotional tired worker at the back? Maybe as you read this, you relate to the laborer, who was among the last crew hired an hour ago. Now you are being paid a denarius! That was not at all what you expected. Neither worker got what they expected.

Rather than seeing this about an economic exchange, though, this is one of those pictures of the kin-dom that Jesus paints. It is about Love – God's love and grace. This is Jesus saying, **God's love looks like this**. No matter what time they have put in or how deserving or undeserving we may think the laborers to be. ¹

Remember the prodigal story? The kid who squanders the inheritance he shouldn't have asked for in the first place? He's destitute, and holds little hope that dad will want anything to do with him. Well, you know how that parable of Jesus ends. Dad throws the biggest party while the loyal hard-working brother scowls in the corner. We have those moments of relating to both siblings, I think. Jesus is asking us, though, "Do you get it?"

Love is a gift from God; feel that undeserved gift. Really feel it. Then you might actually celebrate from the back of the line with that labourer at the front who feels like he just won the lottery.

Remember, the landowner gave the original workers what was promised – a day's wage, a denarius. Nothing fancy, in fact it isn't much. But everyone was paid, all were looked after. Went to the marketplace, found people without work, brought them to the vineyard, and gave them work. God's love is grounded in righteousness, a theological word for acting right, being in right relationships, being just and fair in how we treat absolutely everyone. Love that overcomes barriers and walls, to connect with people whom the world would tell you not to.

¹ Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

I had the privilege of doing chaplaincy work in federal prisons. Believe it or not, I wanted to learn about life in prison, and the Salvation Army offered me a position for two years. My colleague Harvey, a Salvation Army officer, visited Kingston Penitentiary regularly, an institution notorious for housing inmates who committed the most heinous crimes in our society. Harvey sometimes visited the infamous Paul Bernardo there. I asked him, "What is that like? What is he like?"

Harvey's response was, "He is a child of God." It was an honest, heartfelt response to what I thought was a loaded question.

God's Love is like that. It loves absolutely everyone. God's Grace treats everyone the same. Grace is by definition unearned, which is infuriating to the person who doesn't understand God's wisdom; the person who does not understand unconditional love. Love sees everyone as a child of God.

The photo on the screen, if Roger could show it to you, is taken from Manger Square in Bethlehem, Palestine. You will see the main Bethlehem Mosque flanked by many Christian church steeples scattered around the city. There is great religious coexistence there, but Bethlehem has a wall running around it. Israel annexes land well within Palestinian territory, but as soon as Israel takes the land, demolishes family homes, Palestinians organize and peacefully demonstrate. They plant olive trees to symbolically reclaim their land. Of course, Israel has more military might.

At many of those demonstrations that I chronicled while there, I almost always saw Israelis participating, demonstrating. Now you should know that it is illegal for an Israeli to participate in such a protest, and I noticed that Israeli authorities treated Israeli citizens more harshly than Palestinians. Israelis – retired professors, young and old. I even saw a 12-year-old Israeli girl attend an olive tree planting demonstration. She informed me that her parents did not approve, but there she was, standing with Palestinians – risky love.

That is what love looks like. A ten-metre concrete wall cannot stop God's love from getting across, through us as we love everyone, no exceptions. It is a holy, irrepressible love that crosses boundaries of all sorts: religious, gender orientation, class, ethnicity.

If you are saying to me, "Dave, I get it. I love everyone," let me put that to the test: Standing in line waiting for denarius after toiling all day, what if Donald Trump, God bless him, is one of those later recruits and he is IN FRONT of you!

God's kin-dom vision of our world upends our common sense, reorients our spiritual compass. No room for assumptions or judgements. Baffling right! That's God's Love that we are now called to imitate.

We are within the worldwide week of prayer for peace in Palestine and Israel, and so I would invite you to pray with me the prayer offered by Bishop Hossam Naoum of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem:

God of all creation, your love is infinite and embraces all people and all of creation. We cannot fully comprehend the height, depth or width of your divine love. Though it is beyond measure, we give thanks that your love has captured our hearts enabling us to love all, especially those with whom we disagree and who see us as their enemies.

Inspired by your love, may we seek to be in solidarity with each other, sharing in a common humanity.

Possessed by your love, may our hearts be opened and our fists unclenched; lead us by the Holy Spirit to reach out across the barriers that divide us as neighbours. Triune God, give to your people creative solidarity in common fragility. Amen