

*Grumbling About Grace*

Matthew 20:1-16

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

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A funny thing happened to me soon after I began my pastorate here—ten years ago. I had taken part in the *nihongo* service and was joining the congregation for lunch in the social hall. I was reaching for a lunch when a woman at the table looked at me and said, “Were you in the service?” What she meant was, these lunches are only for people who were in worship. Yes, I did go to the service, I told her. Fortunately, she believed me. From her perspective, apparently, if you hadn’t sat through the worship service, you hadn’t earned a seat at the lunch table.

The incident was amusing, but it has stuck with me all these years, possibly because it was so out of character with the more usual graciousness I witness in the body life here, whether English or Japanese. The incident does betray the fact that even in the best of churches, it is really hard to let go of the “earn it and deserve it” mentality. That’s why this parable that Jesus tells his disciples is timeless.

The early church was often made up of a mix of Jewish and Gentile believers. The Jewish believers were descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Because of the faith, their families had been blessed and had suffered. They had served and stood fast through good times and bad. Now suddenly Gentiles were being welcomed into their faith community. And without any probationary period, without a lengthy apprenticeship in the Jewish culture, they were being offered the gifts of grace and the promise of salvation. You can understand why there might have been a few disgruntled feelings.

There sometimes is a shocking edge to God’s grace. *We have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day*, and all we get is the same as those who have worked only one hour in the cool of the evening! Something’s not right about that. Those who have worked harder should be rewarded with more. Do any of us leave a bigger tip for waiters who serve us poorly? No! You save the bigger tip for the outstanding waiters and waitresses. But here Jesus describes a God who gives the same day’s wage to those who have worked a full day, and to those who have only worked an hour.

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This parable is essentially about two things: God and the church. What it reminds us about God is that God’s sense of graciousness or generosity can at

times prove outrageous to us. It is possible for us to grumble about grace, especially when we feel that others have received more for less service or less time sacrificing for the Kingdom. Try as we might, it is hard for us to really let go of the sense that one should get what one deserves. But Jesus reminds us that the gospel of grace is about everyone getting—in a wonderful sense—not what we deserve (the penalty for our sins) but what we don't deserve: salvation in Christ.

I have to admit that the justice the parable describes is not the kind of justice I find natural. If I had been the owner of the vineyard, I might have paid the last workers a full day's wage, but then I would have doubled everybody else's wage as well. A Jewish teaching from the first century that may have actually been created as a reaction to Jesus' parable tells this same story, but then explains that the workers who had started latest actually accomplished as much as those who had worked all day! Which only illustrates that our human standard of justice has a hard time with this picture of a generous and unpredictable God.

But if we ever feel tempted to grumble about grace ourselves, all we need to do is ask with whom we are making the comparisons. It's easy to get upset and indignant when we compare ourselves with those we feel are not doing their fair share. But what of the comparison between ourselves and others who are doing so much more?

Put another way, if we place ourselves in this parable in the role of the first workers, we end up grumbling. But what if we place ourselves in the position of the workers hired last? In fact, as Gentiles, as non-Jews, that's where we all are. Most of us are first generation, or at most, second-generation Christians. Compared to a two thousand-year history of the church, guess what hour our arrival appears to be?

This parable offers an important lesson about who God is. And secondly, it offers a lesson about the kind of life God desires to cultivate in his church. It is clear from this and other teachings in this part of Matthew that Jesus was very concerned about the life that would grow in the church he would leave behind. And once again, as he did with last week's parable of the Unforgiving Debtor, Jesus gives us a motive to be at peace with our brothers and sisters in the church because of the relationship that we share with our Heavenly Father.

Here again, it is the light of heaven that erases the dark grumbings that threaten to divide and destroy the unity of the Body of Christ. When we are tempted to grumble because of perceived injustices and grievances with one another, it is helpful to put our horizontal relationships in the context of our vertical relationship with God. And it may also be helpful to remember that as lengthy or as brief as our time may be in the vineyard of the Lord, it is a privilege for us to serve.

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Matthew's church struggled with the inclusion of Gentiles in the faith that began as a part of Judaism. Remember that Jewish men thanked God for being male rather than female, and Jewish rather than Gentile or pagan. It was a real clash of cultures to suddenly have both sorts of people in the same community. Parallels might be desegregation in our own country, or the ending of apartheid in South Africa.

Whatever the mix of people in a given congregation, God's desire is for his people to get along, and by extension, to work together well in his fields. For most of us, sooner or later, this involves dealing with the prejudices that we bring into the church, just like the people of Matthew's day imported their ethnic prejudices. The lines can be drawn in any number of ways—the rich and the poor. Republicans and Democrats. Male chauvinists and feminists. Liberals and conservatives. The young and the old. Kamaaina and Mainland.

In our congregation, sometimes it threatens to be *Eigo* and *Nihongo*. English-speaking and Japanese-speaking. (And here I'm going to develop our parable in a specific direction to address our own congregation.)

In the Japanese church I pastored in Los Angeles, people remembered stories of angry clashes between the English- and Japanese-speaking church Council members. I haven't heard stories like that here, but I wouldn't be surprised by them, either. Language and culture are formidable barriers to congregational unity and harmony. Often, the solution is to be separate, as the English and Japanese congregations here have often chosen to be—friendly and sharing budgets, but operationally independent and separate.

Then came the New Creation Initiative, and it just so happened that Pastor Saku Kuroda and the *Nihongo* congregation decided to take part with us in that Conference opportunity. And when we developed a Vision Portrait, the *Nihongo* chose to adopt the same one rather than come up with a separate one. So the whole church formally adopted that Vision and its accompanying Missional Strategy. And we have restructured our church. Now both the English and the Japanese-speaking congregations share a common Vision, and, at least in name, the same Key Ministry Areas (: Community Formation, Witness, Stewardship and Worship).

When this happened, this church went against the grain of society. Society for a long time has been fragmenting. Community ties have broken down—just look at the chaos following Hurricane Katrina. But instead of pulling apart as two separate congregations, Makiki Christian Church became more unified as a result of the New Creation process. It's not that we "arrived" at that perfect harmony all of a sudden, but we committed ourselves to a journey in that

direction because we believed that this was the way that the gospel—that God—wanted us to go.

Can we make it work? Sure we can. We see the partnership between our two congregations at work in our Church Camps, in our fall festivals or bazaars, in our youth activities, and at our leadership events—our regular meetings and our retreats. We have found that collaboration builds bridges, strengthens the church and blesses all of us. I believe that we are walking by faith and sowing to the Spirit as we do this. And one of the crucial disciplines that we have identified that we need to develop if this is to work is discernment—the ability to make wise choices as a congregation.

Discernment has to do with making decisions or choices. Everybody and every church makes decisions, so in that sense, every church exercises discernment. Sometimes, it is left to the pastor or other church leader to decide. And sometimes that is fine. But at other times, the wisdom of a single person—or even a few people—is not enough. Sometimes, it is the combined wisdom of the body that is required for the best decision to be made, and this, of course, takes more time. But it can be crucial. And it is often good for the congregation to get exercised in this way.

There is an informal proposal before this church right now that is being considered by some in both English- and Japanese-speaking congregations. It has to do with continuing the relationship sparked during our Centennial year with certain groups in Kochi, Japan. You may remember that soon after our anniversary banquet, our church sent one of our then-high schoolers to Kochi at the invitation of some guests who had attended our Centennial. And this past spring, our church hosted a group of about 20 students and advisers from Tosajuku high school in Kochi.

The first question is whether we should continue to invite students to come. Another question that is important to some is whether we should also be planning to send our own young people—or others from our church—to Japan in a kind of “exchange” relationship. This possibility has been discussed by the ad hoc planning committee that oversaw this year’s hosting program, and also by both Witness Boards of the church—Japanese and English. It has also been discussed a lot among sensei, myself and other church leaders.

I think it is one of those questions that requires the input of the whole church. And I raise it this morning out of this Scripture because this question for us has the potential of building bridges or walls between the English- and Japanese-speaking congregations here. So let me share just a little more, and then invite you to think, pray and respond as you are led.

I like the way that Sensei framed the opportunity when he spoke to our Witness Board last Monday. Missionary efforts in Japan, he said, have not

proven very successful. After centuries of effort, less than 1 percent of Japan is Christian. But there is an uncharacteristic openness to Christian faith demonstrated by Japanese people once they leave Japan. That is why, for example, Setsu Kuroda can serve as a full-time missionary serving simply Japanese students returning to Japan.

In the case of this church, the connection to Kochi is special. Not only did the founding pastor of this church come from Kochi and use the Kochi castle as the model of this sanctuary, but today the people of Kochi have a curiosity and interest in the legacy of one of their sons. That interest and high regard was demonstrated in the Okumura Exhibit, which was created and originally displayed in Kochi, then sent here to Makiki for exhibit.

Bound up in this, a private, secular high school in Kochi now views this Christian church as a legitimate partner in cross-cultural exchange. Amazingly, the school's officials not only want to send students here, they also want their students to be introduced to the Christian gospel when they come. They want "full exposure," so to speak.

This is what happened during this year's visit. As a result, according to what Sensei has heard, a couple of the students in that group of 10 have explored a Christian church back in Kochi, and one of the adults accompanying the students was baptized recently, coming to faith as a result of the trip.

Does this mean that we should continue to invite and host students from this school? There are many questions and thoughts about this, believe me! But one of the most important signs that will shape our response is this: How many of us are willing to open our homes and to give our time and energy to this project? Because of the success of the first visit, the school in Kochi is eager to set up a repeat—next year, if possible. Is this where we feel led?

I am not trying to "push" this on you, the congregation. But neither am I trying to discourage anyone from responding to this. I hope many of you will think about this. Pray on it. Discuss it. If you want more information, please feel free to contact me. And if and when you feel like you would like to lend your support to this program, let me know. I will add your name to a list of people that we will, if it seems right, bring together to discuss and shape and plan for this project, in collaboration with members of the *Nihongo* congregation.

Some of you have been a part of this church all your lives. Some of us have been here only a short time. No matter who we are, let us remember the One who invites us to labor in his field, and for what purpose. And let us work together faithfully as we are led.