

Grace Isn't Fair

She had a big heart and a wide smile. Her name was Calista - or Cal as we called her. Cal was always on the go. One day it would be meals-on-wheels. The next day it would be working in the thrift shop or volunteering at the soup kitchen. The day after that it would be teaching an inner-city child how to read or visiting parishioners in a nursing home. During the summer Cal was involved in not one but two Vacation Bible Schools.

Cal was as faithful a church member as you could get. Up until the time the cancer took its toll, she never stopped helping people. In my funeral sermon, I said that I could imagine when Cal got to the pearly gates, Jesus would be there to greet her and say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

There seems to be a Cal in every church. That person you can count on: the saint who gives generously and serves faithfully – the committed church member who loves God and loves people, all sorts of people.

In our gospel today, Jesus addresses the question of who is more-deserving to enter the kingdom of heaven by sharing a story. A rich landowner needs some extra laborers to work in his vineyard. It's quite possibly late September during the harvest season. The weather is still very hot and it's extremely important to have the harvest in before the heavy rainfall.

The landowner goes into town at 6 a.m. and finds a group of men looking for work. He hires several of them and promises to pay them a fair wage. Since these workers are probably unskilled, they depend heavily on these temporary jobs to support their families. Any job is better than having to beg for food or watching one's own children go hungry.

At nine, at noon and at three o'clock, the owner goes back to town and hires some more laborers who are also looking for work. Then at 5 p.m., with only one hour left in the workday, the owner goes back once again into town and hires the few workers remaining.

Why are these workers still looking for work at five in the afternoon? We're not sure. Maybe they're having a tough time finding work. Or perhaps they're the feeblest, the oldest, and the least desirable of all the workers.

At the end of the day the owner of the vineyard calls his foreman and instructs him to pay the workers. It was a Jewish custom to pay workers at the end of each day. The owner orders the workers who had worked the least to be paid first. They're paid a full day's wage for their efforts.

When the day workers see the first workers being paid so generously, they get excited about how much they're going to get paid. They figure if they receive the same hourly wage as the group who worked only one hour, they'll receive twelve days' pay for only one day's work. It's going to be a great day.

But then the foreman pays them the exact same wage as the rest. Their reaction to the owner is predictable. This is unfair. We're not being treated equally. This is an injustice! Their hopes for a windfall are crushed. It's also tough to see all the

workers who worked less get paid the same. Instead of being happy for the others, they envy them and are bitter.

Why is it so hard for us to be happy when something good happens to someone else? All the owner did was to give the workers enough money to take care of their homes and feed their families. Should the owner be condemned because he decided to pay all the workers out of compassion and not on grounds of merit?

We struggle with that issue even today, don't we? Every Episcopal parish, I suppose, has some people who never show up for worship, never give any money, and never do any ministry, but who insist on remaining members.

Shouldn't we just drop these people from the rolls? Then there are those who are not even members of the church but seek the church's ministry at certain points in their lives.

Shouldn't we refuse to marry them or baptize their children, refuse to counsel them when they need help, refuse to be at their bedside when they are sick, or even refuse to bury them when they die? After all, doesn't membership have its privileges?

So why should such people, who never help in the church and only come on Christmas and Easter, be entitled to the same treatment as the most dedicated, long-term members?

I must confess that I always enjoy Christmas Eve services, because it's the time when the awkward-squad turns out in mass. People you never see during the year seem to come faithfully during Christmas.

In my Lancaster, Pennsylvania parish, as I was greeting people after the 11 p.m. Christmas Eve service, one dear man shook my hand, gave me a hearty smile and said, "Merry Christmas, pastor. See you next year." Sure enough, the next Christmas Eve, this man was at the same 11 p.m. service, and this time he said to me as he was leaving church, "Gee pastor, it's great to see you again!"

But let's be honest. Some of us get a little flustered when some of these people have the audacity to sit in our favorite chair. Imagine someone who hardly ever comes to worship getting one of the best seats in the church – and faithful you

are forced to sit in the back – on Christmas Eve no less! It doesn't seem fair.

Well, do we want the truth? We - all of us - are more like the eleventh-hour workers than the ones who worked all day. It's only through grace that we receive the glorious future God has prepared for us. We can all receive God's grace, but none of us deserves it. While this may seem unfair, if grace was fair, it wouldn't be grace.

When I was a newly ordained priest ministering on the rural Gaspé Coast of Quebec, in one of my hospital visits I came across a member of my parish I had not yet met. The first time I was with him I was a bit overwhelmed. He had smoked since he was 12 years old and his cough was loud and kind of repulsive. At first it was hard to understand his gruff and weakened voice. The room was filled with machinery. There was the heart monitor, the IV monitor, and the oxygen tank. He never liked having the tube wrapped around his ears and in his nose. The room itself was quite bare. No television. No radio. No telephone. No cards or flowers.

Over the next few weeks I visited the man two or three times a week. His name was Willard. When I entered the room, I would sit by his bed. Even if it had been a rotten day for him, he would perk up, open his eyes, and develop a faint smile when telling me a story. He would tell me stories of life on the Gaspé Coast so slowly and deliberately. Most of the stories were about hard times, about the difficulties during the Great Depression – eating a steady diet of homegrown boiled potatoes and whatever fish they managed to catch because there was no money to buy food, or how he buried his wife and two of his three children. While he never told the same story twice, every story had a bit of humor and a bit of irony.

Then one day when I entered the room, it was obvious things had changed. Except for the oxygen tank, they had taken the rest of the equipment out of the room. The room seemed gloomier. The curtains had been kept closed. It was the first time I had noticed in Willard's room the antiseptic hospital smell.

Willard was in bed. He didn't perk up this time to tell me a

story. It was hard for him to talk much, but struggling he said to me, "I would like to have communion."

Willard had never attended church, not in my time, not in anyone's time, so I was told. I asked Willard why he never went to church. And his eyes were more intense than ever before: BECAUSE YOU NEVER ASKED ME.

I knew Willard was thinking of more people than just me when he said you never asked me. But he was right. When I arrived in the parish, I was driven around the area by a warden to see where parishioners lived. When we passed Willard's house, the warden said, "That's Willard's house, but don't bother with him. He never goes to church."

Yet surely someone in his life had told him about Christ. Surely, he had some memory of the church.

That afternoon Willard came back to church, and we shared communion together for the first time. I read the Office for the Sick, and then added a few prayers for the dying. Willard was so appreciative, and thanked me over and over. The

next day, he died.

In the time I knew Willard, he taught me a lesson I had yet to learn as a new priest. It doesn't matter if you come to Christ as a small child or on your deathbed, it doesn't matter if you're a cradle Episcopalian or a penitent thief on a cross, God's grace is still a precious gift for you.

Willard's funeral was two days later. At the church service were his son and family, two cousins, some neighbors, and myself. The Burial Office from The Book of Common Prayer was the same service used for even the most loyal and faithful church members. The one hymn we sang was "Abide with me." On the Gaspé Coast that hymn was sung at almost every funeral. Somehow it spoke to the people there, many of whom, like Willard, lived a hard life. The last stanza goes:

Hold thou thy Cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Thank God, grace isn't fair.

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September 24, 2017

Text - Matthew 20:1-16

Proper 20, A