**Overpaid**

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Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16

I wonder if you’ve ever had the experience of getting paid too much. You like your job so much, you’d probably do it for free if you could. But you show up, and kaching! every week or every other week they put money in your account. Or maybe you hate your work, and put in the minimal effort, and they still pay you!

Anyone?

It would be kind of a weird feeling, right? We are kind of told that the only reason they pay us is because otherwise we wouldn’t do it otherwise. To get paid for doing something we like, or get paid more than we really deserve seems odd, like we’re taking advantage of someone.

Or this happened to me on Friday: I went to a coffee shop. I’m not supposed to tell you the name of the shop because the barista asked me not to. So, I’ll just tell you that the original shop was on Water Street. I went to get a refill of my coffee, and the barista took pity on me, I think because I told her that no one ever told me *I* looked bold in the way she’d praised the previous customer. And she gave me a free refill. It just didn’t seem quite right.

The reason, of course, that the barista told me not to tell others is that she was worried that other people would expect free refills, too. Or maybe post it on Facebook in some “12 discounts you can get at a coffee shop which has the same name as the original coffee shop on Water Street.” We come to expect certain levels of fairness. Some of us feel bad we get give something we don’t deserve. Some of us live getting more than our fair share. Some of us might march in protest if there’s any discrepancy.

This story that Jesus tells is just that story. Every worker gets paid the same, whether they showed up early or late. And the people who showed up early are upset, because they got paid less per hour. But, the boss reasonably points out that the early workers agreed to work for that day’s wages, so they really had no real beef with him. Were they angry because the boss was generous? Why should that make them angry?

And so, a natural question is: what does this teach us about modern American labor relations: between workers and employers.

And now I would like to tell you the answer: Almost literally nothing.

The story is not about labor and wages. The story is about what Christians call “grace.” Grace is just God giving us more than our fair share of goodness.

The story is about this: “the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.” As far as our connection to God goes, there is a great leveling that has happened. Everyone has an equal claim to God’s attention, and everyone receives God’s attention unsparingly.

Remember Jesus’s welcome was not to those who worked up just the right actions and attitudes; it was not to the religious leaders, or even those who really got it right. John the Baptist, said Jesus, was the greatest prophet ever. You might even say, he was first—but the first shall be last, and Jesus claims that the least of his followers who came afterwards (those mournful people, those meek people, those poor people with their crushed spirits) were greater than John.

Despite what appears to be our best efforts to self-destruct as a nation, we are still number one in many things: we have the biggest economy, the most nuclear weapons, the best higher education system. So it is easy sometimes for us American Christians to act as if *we* are the best Christians in the world. But if we claim to be first, this is a precarious place to be!

Rather we should be like in the song:

*What poor, despised company*

*Of travelers are these,*

*That walk in yonder narrow way,*

*Along the rugged maze?*

*Ah, they are of a royal line,*

*All children of a King;*

*Heirs of immortal crowns divine,*

*And loud for joy they sing.*

We are last, and we are first: poor and despised, yet children of a king.

The Old Testament lesson is strangely connected. The children of Israel are lost in the wilderness, and they see a problem: God has called them into the wilderness, but left them without food! “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread!” Yes, they had it so well, building those pyramids and grain shelters, their first-born males subject to death… Anyway, their fears get the better of them, and they complain.

And Moses promises that God is going to “rain bread” on them, something which had never happened before. This God will do despite their whinging. They think that they are first; God knows they are last, and in need of pity, and pity God takes on them.

He sends them manna from heaven: food just enough for their needs. They didn’t deserve it, perhaps. Perhaps what they deserved has a stern talking-to (at least!) But God gave them bread, instead.

We are about to celebrate the feast of communion. This also is bread we don’t deserve. Even those closest to Jesus betrayed him; how much worse would we do? What right do we have to come up to God’s table and *demand bread*? None at all.

But yet the bread is provided; the cup is provided.

Scripture tells us that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. We can very grateful that we do not get the wages we deserve.

Scripture tells up God provided bread in the wilderness to a people who did not deserve it. The gift of God is eternal life though Jesus Christ our Lord, who gives us his life, recognized in the symbols of this bread broken as his bones were broken, and this wine pour out, and his blood pour out his life.

Let us celebrate the feast.