

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 20 September @ 11 am service

Readings: Exodus 16: 2-15 & Matthew 20: 1-16

Sermon: Economy of scarcity versus Economy of Grace

Good morning all; it's so good to share with you God's word at this hour,

The Bible says, 'Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity' We live in tumultuous times.

The eighteenth-century enlightenment philosopher Thomas Paine wrote 'These are the times that try men's souls. We live in a world of conspiracy theories, blatant lies by leaders of powerful countries, incompetence of dealing with issues that affect the masses, ignoring ideas from ordinary people who do not fit into the elite political class of society.

Today we are called to look into the haves and have not, scarcity and plenty in what I have termed, 'Economy of scarcity and Economy of Grace'.

An old Rabbi told a story. It went like this...A farmer had two sons. From childhood, he taught them how to cultivate the family farm business so that in his old age they would take over the running of the farm, cultivating crops and animals.

As soon as the old man passed away, the sons took over the running of the business.

The younger son married and had several children, the elder did not get married.

It was time to harvest the farm. The bachelor son thought 'my younger brother has several mouths to feed, and I have only one. I will give him a lot more of my share of the harvest, but I know he won't accept it. I will wait at night time when he is asleep, sneak into his store and leave part of my share to help him feed his children.

The younger brother was also thinking about helping his elder brother. He said to himself 'I have these lovely children and my brother do not have any. He needs more than me to save for his old age. I will give him some of my share of the harvest, but he won't accept it. I will wait at night time, sneak into his store with part of my harvest.

And so, one night when the moon was full, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. These two boys had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the Holy One and because we are made in God's image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well.

The readings from Exodus and Matthew re-introduces us to the economy of grace. We are confronted with a challenge to dig deep into our psyche to discover and to confront our own deepest anxieties of fear, greed and pride. We are reminded of the chasm that exists between God's Kingdom and the kingdoms of this world but within it, we are given hope that God is at work in creation, healing and in transforming its broken members....us.

The story which is more than 3000 years old continues to be of great significance to us in the 21st century.

The scene is a familiar one. The Israelites are in the desert and they were hungry. They began to grumble and complain (murmur) questioning the faithfulness of God and the leadership of Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the flesh pots and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'. The Israelites had a desire to go back to Egypt. An example I suggest of what is referred to as the Stockholm Syndrome. In captivity they developed an irrational psychological alliance with their captors, a feeling of trust, even affection.

The story suggests that the Israelites had become deeply acculturated, that is, they had come to terms with or assimilated into the dominant culture and in spite of their hardship had come to accept a settled life of fatal comfortability. They had forgotten how God rescued them from slavery and parting the Red Sea for them to cross over as they were chased by the Egyptian army. They had forgotten the Passover experience that had finally changed Pharaoh's hardened heart. They grumbled. They complained. They murmured.

'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,' "For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

We Africans understand and are familiar with hunger and famine that can lead to irrational behaviour. Among the people of Chad (a landlocked country in Central Africa) is a saying 'one day of hunger can make a wife leave a husband's house'.

Personally, I have not been held captive as a slave, (my ancestors were, some liberated others emancipated), nor have I spent any time in a desert, nor felt hunger in the way depicted in the story so I really do not know how that might feel.

In slavery, the Israelites had come to accept that the Egyptian gods were responsible for the subjugation and humiliation they found themselves including filling the fleshpots from which they ate. That was the cultural and religious reality of the Egyptians and now it has become the conscious reality of the enslaved Hebrew people but that consciousness was about to change as they sojourned in the wilderness where they met the radical 'otherness' of the God of their ancestors. They were presented with and forced to embrace the economy of grace that God

represents, an economy that is not predicated on scarcity, competition or fear, but rather on plenitude, generosity and love.

And like me who murmur and complain, is there a cure? What hope is there for me?

Many people do not have grounds for murmuring. They have been blessed far beyond what they could ever deserve and they are aware of their good fortune. Intellectually they know that there are millions of people who would gladly trade places with them. You may know the line: "I cried because I had no shoes until I saw a man who had no feet . . ." a line ascribed to various authors, Tolstoy, Helen Keller and others,

We look at our lives and all that we have, and we know that every day we ought to offer a testimony of thanksgiving and praise to God. But still we complain. Still we murmur.

Life is filled with frustrations, irritations, trials and tribulations. Life has many downers. We would not try to minimize that fact. Sometimes, however, we need to step back and put our lives into perspective. We need to count our many blessings, as the old hymn says, name them one by one and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

This contrast reappears in the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 20, with the workers who had laboured the full day representing the old consciousness of the economy of scarcity and the generous landowner the economy of grace.

This text is the antithesis of conventional wisdom.

It's about the miracle of grace — and not last-minute conversions.

A landowner that pays equal wages for men who do not work equal hours. That's inequitable and runs counter to natural justice and fair play. Who would work all day if you could simply wait till the last hour and then collect a day's pay? The fact is that deep within us we have a kind of sympathy for those grumbling labourers.

The beeline of the story is that the person who comes late is just as important as the person who comes early. There is no such thing as an ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Kingdom of God.

Another story, the last one I promise!

On New Year's Sunday the churches in a Circuit had come together for a combined Communion service. There had been several conversions of thieves, burglars and so on lately in the Circuit and this Sunday was no exception.

It was time for Communion and the congregants were invited to come forward to receive, all kneeling side by side. As they did so, the Rev Minister noticed a former

burglar who had been converted and became a Christian worker kneeling side by side to a Supreme Court Judge, the one who had sent him to prison for seven years for burglary. Both seemed to be unaware of each other.

After the service, the Judge and the Minister were walking home and having a quiet conversation. The Judge said to the Minister "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?"

The Minister replied "Yes, but I didn't know that you noticed." The two walked along in silence for a few more moments, and then the judge said, "What a miracle of grace." The Minister nodded in agreement. "Yes, what marvellous miracle of grace." The Judge did not fully understand, so he asked "but to whom do you refer?" And the Minister said, "Why, to the conversion of that convict of course." The Judge said, "but I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself." Surprised, the Minister replied, "You were thinking of yourself?" "Yes," the Judge replied, "it did not cost that burglar much to get converted when he came out of jail. He had nothing but a history of crime behind him, and when he saw Jesus as his Saviour, he knew there was salvation, hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help. But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take Communion and so on. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a Judge. Rev, the Judge said, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with that burglar.

Christian friends, Grace is for everybody and it's enough for everybody. The vineyard owner gave each labourer a denarius irrespective of the amount of time they spent in the vineyard.

Not surprisingly, those who put in more time were furious. At first reading, we may be tempted to think of the story as one of late life conversion, but I submit to you my friends that it was all about God's saving grace.

The landowner's question to the complaining laborers—"are you envious because I am generous?"—strikes me as especially relevant in the tumultuous time we live in. Those who are accustomed to having more than enough, believing it to be hard-earned and well-deserved, show just how captive we are to the old consciousness and the economy of scarcity. We become enraged at the suggestion that some or even much of the wealth and power we possess, we hold, at least in part, by virtue of our racial and cultural inheritance and our privileged status and could not share what we have with others in a broken world.

Bob Woodward in a telephone interview for his book published this week RAGE, asked Donald Trump whether he feels that his privilege and wealth and being a white person insulates him from seeing the pain Black people suffer from structural racism in the United States. He poohpoohed the suggestion and said that he doesn't

subscribe to the idea of White privilege. Accepted that white privilege doesn't always make white people's life easy, I will suggest that having an understanding of what white privilege means or is, can make the difference in understanding why some people's lives are harder than they should be.

Unsure of the adequacy of God's generous grace, we tighten our grip on the status quo unwilling to share in God's providence. Unsure of God's infinite generosity afforded to others, we express envy, jealousy and fear. If we can turn even slightly to God's infinite generosity we will have begun to learn and to live in the economy of grace. **God bless us all**

AMEN