

## Reflection for Together@10 Baptism Service

Date: 24.09. 2023 Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Title: Are You Envious Because I am Generous?

### Introduction

Let me first welcome all of you to this baptism service. Good to see so many of you here. I hope you will find this service meaningful for you. As you know we are here to baptise Amelie Alice May Smith and Jasper Andrew Hanson into the family of God.

What is baptism? Or what is the meaning of baptism?

The Uniting Church considers baptism as a gift from God.

*“Baptism is a visible sign of God’s grace. That is most powerfully expressed in the practice of baptising infants as well as adults as an expression of God’s gracious welcome into the community of faith.”*

For the moment I want you to remember just two words – **GOD’ GRACE.**

*John, an alcoholic, went to the church to find a solution for his drinking problems.*

*The priest, after a long talk, asks: Are you baptized?*

*No. Well then, I'll give you the holy baptism and you'll be a new man.*

*The priest plunged John 3 times in the water and says:*

*You are now a new creature! There will be no more alcohol in your life! You're not John anymore, you'll be Joseph instead, a new clean and healthy man!*

*Joseph found the method odd but really liked the experience.*

*So Joseph went home, directly to the fridge, took a beer and dipped it in the water saying: You're a now new creature! You're not beer anymore, you're now orange juice.*

*Baptism is not magic. I am sure you know that it doesn't turn beer into orange juice.*

## Let us pray...

Whether you are aware or not we are all living a transactional life.

With maxims like *'what's in it for me', 'I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine', and 'quid pro quo'*. And if we look within, most of our activities, actions, and relationships are transactional. And the transactional posture of life has also affected our understanding of God.

For example, our prayer time is spent focusing more on what we want, or what we think we need, than simply resting in God's presence. The rising popularity of "name it and claim it" theology has had devastating effects on spiritual depth and understanding. People are leaving the Church because they don't "get" anything out of it.

We live in a highly consumer-driven and on-demand culture. The problem is that the same consumer mentality has crept into the Church.

Believe it or not, I once had a person in a church tell me that she wasn't going to give to the church any more unless I removed a person from a leadership position in the church. People believe they are entitled to have things a certain way, and if things don't go their way, they are out. And it doesn't matter what it is — musical style, particular hymns/songs, the colour of the carpet or the walls, which banners to hang — these are all petty, but real, reasons why some people have gotten upset in the church.

At the core: **a consumer mentality.**

And what happens when we take an **on-demand mentality** into the Church?

We start expecting to get things when we want them. We expect our shopping list prayers to be answered in a timely fashion in the way that we want.

We start living out the “name it and claim it” mentality without really thinking about the implications. I want it, I believe I should have it, and all I need is a little more faith to make it happen. And that’s where it really gets dangerous.

*When I arrived in Melbourne in 1983, I was invited to a home bible study group.*

*At the end of the Bible Study, we broke up into small groups to pray for each other.*

*In my group, a gentleman asked us to pray for him because he was looking to buy a car.*

*He wanted to know the will of God, whether to buy a BMW or Mercedes.*

No kidding. We live in a transactional, highly consumer driven and on-demand-culture. The gospel reading for this morning – Matthew 20:1-16 is difficult for many to understand. Let me recap the parable.

*In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, a foreman hired labourers early in the morning, then successively throughout the day at the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours. A twelve-hour day of manual labour, with the "burden of the work and the heat of the day" (Matthew 20:12), is a long day.*

*That evening, the foreman settled accounts, paying those who had worked a meagre one-hour the same as those who had worked twelve hours.*

Friends, from our contemporary context, this parable brings to mind issues of immigration and daily labourers.

What is “fair” for those who work among us as migrant workers or labour in the various service industries supporting Western financial institutions, the highly educated professional class and our technologically driven economic complex?

And what is to us if the minimum wage rises to assist those workers on the lowest end of our economic system?

The first-century workers union complaint, <sup>11</sup> *And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'* (cf. 20:11-12) seems reasonable, even if misguided.

Why wouldn't those who have laboured less receive less? But the landowner had a different conception of fairness. In the first-century economy, the master could choose to do what he pleased with his resources.

The owner of the vineyard asks those who have worked longest and (presumably) hardest for him, *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? **Or are you envious because I am generous?"***

So, the parable is not about the "labourers in the vineyard." In fact, this is not even a story about the *growth* of the vineyard. Nor was there any significant attention on the *activities* of the workers. We hear the complaints of those who have toiled all day long, but the story is really not about them either. Rather, Jesus' parable highlights the generosity of God.

As the ultimate "landowner," God will use what has always belonged to the Creator for the good of all even if humans fail to view the world through God's eyes.

This parable is a reminder of the absolute gift of generosity that does not demand response, that does not account for reciprocity, that is not transactional.

The parable is not about "reimbursement" or "fair wages" – the principles we normally associate with hired labour.

Through the parable, Jesus directs those who were called first to comprehend the world into which they have been invited, and to join him in inviting the last ones – the sick, the poor, the women, the latecomers, the unimportant – instead of comparing and complaining. It is rather about a gracious and undeserving gift.

*“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”*

***Or are you envious because I am generous?”***

The story in our Gospel reading – Matthew 20:1-16 is ultimately about God’s unending grace. While some biblical scholars disagree about some of the details of this parable, all agree that it is about grace.

The emphasis of this parable is on the economy of God’s grace, not on “what our reward is”; humans expect to be rewarded in proportion to their productivity, while God rewards in proportion to God’s generosity according to the measure of grace that God has given to us.

Grace always involves receiving something that you do not deserve.

GRACE is a church word. What is grace?

Grace looks beyond our productivity, our appearance, our dress, our race or ethnicity, our accomplishments, our failures. Grace recognizes there is more to you and who you are than what you have done or left undone. The only precondition of grace is that we show up and open ourselves to receive what God is giving. When we do we begin to see our lives, the world, our neighbour differently.

Stop comparing yourself and your life to others and you will create room for grace to emerge. Refuse to compete in such a way that someone must lose for you to win.

Trust that in God’s world there is enough for everyone.

Let go of expectations based on what you think you or others deserve.

Give God the freedom to pay whatever is right knowing that God’s ways are not your ways.

Make no judgments of yourself or others. That is the way of grace, the way of God.

**“Are you envious because I am generous?”**

Jesus tells us that we all have an equal share of this grace: first, last, or in the middle – everyone gets the same amount. It doesn't matter who you are, or when you started, as long as you entered into the race. Once you place your faith in God, just as Jesus placed his faith in God, your shares of God's grace equal everyone else's shares of grace.

Look again at Matthew 20:10, which says that **“when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more”**:

- They measured their **contributions** by their *productivity* instead of by the grace of God
- They measured their **worth** by their *productivity* instead of by the grace of God
- They measured their **expectations** based on their productivity instead of by the grace of God

Baptism is not magical. It doesn't turn beer into oranges. Remember baptism is a visible sign of God's grace to Amelie Alice May Smith and Jasper Andrew Hanson.

In God's economy: **‘There is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.’ X 2**

That's the extravagant love and grace of God to us all.