

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The Declaration of Independence is perhaps the most revered and masterfully written document within Western civilization. Its extraordinary merits as a work of political prose can be seen in the document's literary qualities and in its rhetorical power.<sup>1</sup> It is the written sentiment of our American colonies that justified our independence as a nation. No American document has had a greater global impact than the Declaration of Independence. As one historian has written: in this sense, the Declaration was the birth certificate of the American nation. It enshrined what came to be seen as the most succinct and memorable statement of the ideals on which this nation was founded. One of its most enthusiastic admirers was the nineteenth-century Hungarian nationalist, Lajos Kossuth: for him, the Declaration was nothing less than "the noblest, happiest page in mankind's history."<sup>2</sup> Within this beloved document, it declares:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

For us gathered here today, I think we might all tend to straighten our backs and puff out our chests just a little bit when we hear these very familiar words from the Declaration of Independence. While this document serves as a source of inspiration it is also regrettably a reminder of un-kept promises and the hypocrisy that takes place in our culture...then and now...depending on how you choose to read it and understand it. It begs the question, what happened to these noble words and how influential were they for the European Jews attempting to flee the Nazi oppression and gain access to a better and safer life within this country during WWII? How effective or influential were these words to a Black man or woman in the south living under Jim Crow laws...which existed for about 100 years post-Civil War to the late 60s, with the residual effects still being felt today in some cases?

In today's culture how do these words fair out when we have become so polarized that any difference at all is viewed as a threat that is then confronted with protest, violence, and even death. Today we know that the truths within this document are NOT self-evident, the lawyers and politicians have made that known to us and we see too that as righteous and as noble as it sounds, we are not equal nor are we endowed with equal rights which cannot be given away or taken away. Today, we understand these words to mean, it is my God given right to do as I please with no regard for you or any one else who tries to stop me or deny me...so much for loving our neighbor as ourselves.

But this is nothing new; it is how we have chosen to live our life from time our Creator scooped us up from the dust and breathed life into us. And this is what the parable within the Gospel today is teaching us about ourselves and in this we see once again just how gracious and merciful

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/stylistic-artistry-of-the-declaration> Originally published in the Spring 1990 issue of *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration*.

<sup>2</sup> <http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/road-revolution/essays/declaration-independence-global-perspective> David Armitage is the Lloyd C. Blankfein Professor of History and Director of Graduate Studies in History at Harvard University. He is also an Honorary Professor of History at the University of Sydney. Among his books are *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007) and *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*, c. 1760–1860 (2010). Copyright © The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History 2009-2019. 49 W. 45th Street, 2nd Floor • NYC, NY 10036

our God truly is. It is a very noble thought...to think that we are all equal, but the anger that bubbles up within us from this parable shows us that while we may be created equal, and we may take pride in the notion of equality, our anger, however, brought about by this parable only reveals that we really do not see equality the way the Declaration declares.

When we are angered by this parable we may find ourselves once again reading and interpreting this parable within a monetary context because we feel that those who have worked all day deserve more than just a day's wage...especially when those who are called at the last hour are getting a day's wage. It's easy to see the injustice within the parable, so we are therefore justified in our anger and we cry foul. We can even say, "its not about money, its just wrong."

And herein lies the reason a good number of people find this parable before us today in our Gospel so offensive. In our minds it's offensive because in this parable and in our day-to-day living we see someone getting more for doing nothing at all or doing a lot less *than we do*, and this offends us. We are offended because we feel that they are not *as* deserving as those who have worked all day long.

There is no denying the fact that one is deserving of a day's wage for a day's worth of work. But what I have found over the years when discussing this parable in a group or a Bible study, we tend to predominately assume the noble role or the righteousness of the workers who have worked all day long in the vineyard. Even when we discuss the wage as God's grace we don't really consider the generosity of the owner of the vineyard...we instinctively cry foul or injustice simply because someone got more...and we will not say it out loud, but if we search our hearts...deep down we are offended because someone got more than me and they certainly are not as deserving as I am...be it a day's wage or even God's grace...our anger only sees that someone got more that didn't deserve it. Now honestly ask yourself how offensive or angering would the parable be, if you were the person who shows up at the last minute and gets a day's wage? Honestly, when looking at God's grace, I see myself as part of the guys who showed up in God's vineyard at about three o'clock when looking at my life.

Nonetheless, I think we can throw all of that right out the window because Jesus himself tells us what really offends us within the parable and it is why I read the Declaration at the outset:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Jesus explains our anger this way:

<sup>9</sup> When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

<sup>10</sup> Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <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...'*(Matt 20:9-12a)

The landowner made them all equal and they were angered...and so are we. This parable is not about a day's wage...it's not necessarily about God's grace...it is telling us, much to our chagrin, that we are all equal in God's vineyard and in our most honest and deepest gut

reaction...we're mad about it. We're mad at God because we think we are better or more deserving than someone else.

As Christians, as believers and followers of Jesus Christ we confess a faith in a Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and we believe that we are gathered together by that Holy Spirit. Through that Holy Spirit our hearts and our minds are certain that Jesus Christ died on a cross to free us from sin and death. Through the love and grace from God revealed to us on that cross we share in that resurrection that is the fruit of that cross.

Even in light of what we believe and what we confess we are still angered and offended by this parable...NOT because of an injustice, I think we are unknowingly angered because Jesus is revealing our true hearts and we too see ourselves as deserving more.

Yes, we were all *created equal*, and yes we are all equal in that we are all a sinner, some more than others, and some more deserving of condemnation but all receiving the same grace and forgiveness found in Jesus Christ and what Christ has done for us on the cross and not what we do in a vineyard. And yes, from the cross we hear the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ:

'Father, forgive them; for *they* do not know what *they* are doing.' (Luke 23:34)

Like the forgiveness last week, we see that God's grace is not given out as we think it ought to. Our offense from this parable only reveals that we take a very high view of ourselves because we predominately view this parable from the perspective of the workers who have worked all day. This parable also reveals that same view of our faith and the grace we think we are "ENTITLED" to...BUT God's grace *IS NOT* our unalienable right as a Christian. In other words, we have no say in who gets what and how much of God's grace. Our entitlement is the harmful perspective from which we judge the daily wages of God's grace and whom we think is deserving of it. Bonhoeffer explains it this way in his treatise on discipleship:

Judging others makes us blind, but love gives us sight. When I judge, I am blind to my own evil and to the grace granted the other person. But in the love of Christ, disciples know about every imaginable kind of guilt and sin, because they know of the suffering of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Across the board of our understanding of grace, deep down we still see this parable as unjust and unfair, because it does not calculate in our minds. But really, consider this, we are still working in the vineyard called life...and we still believe, pray for, and hope for God's grace at the end of our day...no matter the amount of sin, seen or unseen, that we have committed. Even when we continue to think we should receive more let's consider what St. Paul is reminding the church of Philippi and us today:

For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well-- (Philippians 1:29-30)

As people of faith...workers in God's vineyard, we are challenged in so many different ways and we suffer on so many different levels...but some will suffer and be challenged more than others.

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<sup>3</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Discipleship.* Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Martin Kuske† and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis, Fortress Press paperback edition: 2003. Chapter 6 The Sermon On The Mount, heading: Matthew 7: The Community of Disciples Is Set Apart, page 172, par. 179.

But through our faith in God, we are assured of God's grace given to all through the measure of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and not our works. This grace given us is not a wage that we have earned through the hours and work we have put in at the vineyard. Like it or not, through Jesus Christ God has made us all equal in our need for grace and forgiveness. In that, God's grace is the free and unmerited favor of God given at the cost of Jesus Christ, God's only Son...given for us all. The life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the manifestation of grace that is the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings on us all...equally and given to us all at the end of the day.

This Good News may still confuse us, make no sense to us, seem unfair, and that is exactly why it is the Good News because it is not human wisdom, it is a loving God whose foolishness is much wiser than all of our combined wisdom. And so we gather this day by God's grace and mercy to worship and celebrate not what we do for God, nor how hard and how long we work for God, we gather to remember and celebrate God and the love and grace God gives us all through Jesus Christ at the end of our days.<sup>4</sup>

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> Portions of this sermon include ideas inspired by the work of Arlund J. Hultgren in, *The Parables of Jesus, A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000. Chapter 2 A, Parables of God's Extraordinary Forgiveness and Grace, 2.2. *The Workers in the Vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16*, pages 33-46.