

The Table of Grace

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 30, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 20:1-16](#) and [Ephesians 2:1-9](#)

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A year and ten days ago, I saw this graphic¹ on Twitter and thought, “Well, that will attract the internet trolls.” One of the pastors then serving at Middle Collegiate Church on Manhattan, one of our sibling UCC congregations, was trying to get hand fans printed with this design to hand out at the New York City Pride and the print shop refused to print it. On June 20, 2023, Pastor Benjamin Perry was simply expressing his anger about the printer refusing to take the job. And, yeah, I was right, his tweet with the graphic that says, “God is queer,” did bring out the trolls.



The next day Pastor Perry explained in a lengthy thread² what he and Middle Church meant by saying, “God is queer.” Here’s what he wrote: “When I say, ‘God is queer,’ I don’t mean that God has a queer sexual orientation or gender identity. God is God. God does not have a sexual orientation or gender identity. I mean God defies tidy definitions, shatters supposedly fixed borders, exposes the lie of simple binaries.

“Queerness isn’t just about who we’re attracted to, or the genders we know in our bodies. It’s also a truth about the world: The simple categories we are so frequently offered as truth are, fundamentally, lies. That’s part of why there is such vehement and violent resistance to queer people. Queerness is disruptive – it disturbs simple narratives about how the world functions.

“Many people would prefer to pretend that truth does not exist. Queer people’s glorious existence invites all people to question things they assumed had simple answers. What is a man? What is a woman? What is ‘straight’? Am I actually straight, or have I not examined my sexuality? Am I actually cis, or have I not explored my gender?

“In Christianity, God similarly disrupts tidy binaries: Jesus is both divine and human. God is simultaneously three and one. God’s kingdom is here already, but not yet. These are queer identities!

“Of course God is queer! How could a love which transcends space and time be anything else? God’s eternal becoming reflects a creation that is also forever changing. It invites us to consider our own identities as fluid, not static. You, too, are becoming.”

Today’s scripture readings point to the queerness of God. The letter we know as “Ephesians,” was probably not written by Paul (despite its claim that it was). A majority of Biblical scholars think it was written about a generation or so after Paul’s death, and they

¹ Benjamin Perry, <https://x.com/FaithfullyBP/status/1671252699285958657> (posted 20 June 2023).

² Benjamin Perry, <https://x.com/FaithfullyBP/status/1671501749725585408> (posted 21 June 2023).

are not convinced it was actually written to the church in Ephesus. The best ancient manuscripts lack the words “in Ephesus” in verse 1, and the rest of the letter seems to be addressed to “the church” in general, rather than to a specific community with their own issues.³

Scholars like Marcus Borg say this letter comes from a context of the “late first-century Christian accommodation to the hierarchical values of the Roman world.”⁴ Thus, the letter lacks some of the countercultural edge of the seven authentic letters of Paul and of the world-changing orientation of Jesus’ ministry. Even given that limitation, Borg thinks the end of today’s reading nonetheless “concisely summarizes Paul’s affirmation of justification by grace through faith.”⁵

It is easy to read words like, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works” (vv 8-9a), and think this is talking about being saved for heaven and from hell, especially since they come right after a line about us being seated next to Christ “in the heavenly places” (v 6). And for the author of this letter, the connections between grace and faith and salvation may well be primarily about the eternity of the life to come with God.

They are also, I think, about this life. If we are dead *in this life* through trespasses and sin (as verse 1 contends), it is by grace that we are made alive again *in this life*, raising us up in this life to be with Christ in the heavenly places *of this life in this world*.

This is the queerness of God. This is the disruption of tidy binaries. Salvation is for both this life *and* the life to come. Grace transforms us in this world *and* the next. We are all, through grace, simultaneously saints *and* sinners.

The queerness of God is similarly depicted in the parable we heard from Matthew’s gospel. First thing in the morning, a vineyard owner goes down to the Home Depot and hires some day laborers, agreeing to pay them a day’s wage for their work. They readily agree. The vineyard owner goes down to the Home Depot a few hours later and sees that there are others who haven’t been hired yet. He sends them to work in his vineyard, promising to pay them what’s right. He goes back to Home Depot at noon and at 3:00, and both times he finds day laborers who aren’t working, so he sends them to work in his vineyard, promising to pay them what is right. One more time, at 5:00, when the day is almost over, he returns to Home Depot and finds yet more laborers who aren’t working, and he sends them to his vineyard to work. They must have thought, “One hour’s work is better than none. It will at least put something in my belly.”

The day comes to an end and the day laborers gather around the manager to get paid. The vineyard owner tells the manager to pay them all a full day’s wage, and to start by paying the people who worked the fewest number of hours. I can image one of the guys who was hired at the beginning of the day elbowing another and whispering, “Look! The guys who’ve been here for an hour got a full day’s wage. Just imagine what we who have

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 351.

⁴ *Ibid*, 354.

⁵ *Ibid*, 354.

been here since sun-up are going to get.” When they get their pay, they get a full day’s wage, just as they were promised when they were hired. “It’s not fair!” they moan.

And I get it. I get their disappointment and anger. It’s not fair that God loves that dirtbag just as much as God loves me! It’s not fair that God’s grace is lavished on someone, anyone who doesn’t work as hard as I do. And God replies to my moaning, “I never said I’d do what was fair. Remember, I’m queer. I don’t do what is fair; I do what is right.”

This parable is both about the kingdom of heaven here and now, and the kingdom of heaven after we die. Here and now, the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who makes sure all the workers have enough. Everyone, regardless of when he called them to work gets a full day’s wage. A typical day laborer’s wage for a day’s work was a denarius, enough to provide food and shelter for the family for a day. I think we can assume that the landowner will go out tomorrow, and the tomorrows after that, to make sure everyone gets to work, and that everyone has enough. And in the mystery that comes after this life, the kingdom of heaven is like a vineyard owner who makes sure everyone *is* enough by making sure they experience enough grace to know they are loved.

This parable has some real-world implications. Here’s just one. Northwest India and southern Pakistan are the so-called breadbasket of the subcontinent. Growing grains there is getting harder and harder. CBS News reported in May, “Last year, severe heat waves killed more than 100 people in India and Pakistan alone in April and May, again destroying crops and affecting millions of people. “Just like this year, last year the heat wave extended from parts of India to Bangladesh and Myanmar, and all the way to Thailand. This year it went further east, into the Philippines...”

“Most experts do agree ... that climate change is one of the major causes of the brutal heat hitting Asia this spring, and scientists said last year that climate change was making heat waves 100 times more likely to occur.”⁶

“Scientists and environmental activists across the globe have consistently urged nations to cut greenhouse gas emissions, warning it is the only way to slow the rate of global warming. Until that happens, experts fear the death toll will keep rising, and millions of people will face a dire decision with every new heat wave: Work in dangerous conditions, or go to bed hungry.”⁷ Do you hear the echoes of Jesus’ parable?

Whether one is living under the occupying thumb of the Roman Empire or within the demands of American capitalism, the generosity of the vineyard owner is a queer thing. The generosity of God’s grace described in the passage from Ephesians is a queer thing. It’s a lot like a church potluck or the grace we experience at communion. Y’all come. There’s enough for everyone and God wants everyone to have enough.

Amen.

⁶ Arshad R. Zargar, “Summer heat hits Asia early, killing dozens as one expert calls it the ‘most extreme event’ in climate history,” *CBS News*, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/heat-wave-asia-2024-deaths-india-severe-weather-climate-change/> (posted 2 May 2024; accessed 24 June 2024).

⁷ *Ibid.*