

# “Expectations Transformed: Acceptance”

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
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**Philippians 1:21-30 and Matthew 20:1-16**

Paul Tillich was a well-known German theologian of the twentieth century. He taught in seminaries and universities in the U.S., and was of the era when Protestant theologians travelled the country and filled college chapels and sanctuaries.

Tillich’s most well-known sermon is also perhaps one of the most well-known of the twentieth-century, which he repeated from pulpit to pulpit long before the age of YouTube or Facebook or Twitter. It was called “You Are Accepted.” I’ve included its most well-known paragraph on the cover of the bulletin. (From bulletin cover: “Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*”)

“Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!” Here is a bit more...

“It is important to remember that we are not merely separated from each other. For we are also separated from ourselves...(prevented) from loving others (because we are) prohibit(ed)...from losing ourselves in the love with which we are loved eternally...the depth of our separation lies in just the fact that we are not capable of a great and merciful divine love towards ourselves.

“(In that moment when we accept that we are accepted)...everything is transformed...(in) the light of this grace we perceive the power of grace in our relation to ourselves. We experience moments in which we accept ourselves, because we feel that we have been accepted by that which is greater than we. (S)uch moments...make us love our life...make us accept ourselves, not in our goodness and self-complacency, but in our certainty of the eternal meaning of our life. We cannot force ourselves to accept ourselves. We cannot compel anyone to accept himself. But sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say “yes” to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole, that self-hate and self-contempt disappear, and that our self is reunited with itself. Then we can say that grace has come upon us.”

I thought of Tillich’s sermon, and the *graceful truth that we are accepted* many times this week, many times over these past weeks.

I thought of the *graceful truth that we are accepted* as I read Jesus’ parable from Matthew’s gospel, when, like last week’s forgiveness parable, he defies and transforms expectations.

A landowner hires workers for the day, agreeing on a fair wage. Later in the day, he hires more. Then again, three more times. The group hired last is paid first. The group hired first, who worked longer, is paid the same. They grumbled. This is not fair. The owner replies that nothing unfair is going on. “Am I

not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Jesus concludes: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

I thought of the *graceful truth that we are accepted* as I read this parable. So much can be done with it, and commentators and theologians have a field day. We could too.

Charles Cousar (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, pages 493-495) writes that this is "a vivid and even abrasive story... The owner's action upsets the whole arrangement of societal order..."

It is vivid and even abrasive. We needn't dig too deep to get the point. And we needn't ponder too deeply to be challenged by it. Jesus, you will note, directs this story to his followers, the insiders. Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock write that "The hearer tends to identify with those first hired... The parable is upsetting because it functions to challenge and reverse conventional values, including the sense of justice and fairness conventional... (it) deals with resentment toward others who have actually received the grace one affirms in theory..." (*The People's New Testament Commentary*, page 80)

Dale Bruner (*Matthew: A Commentary*, Pages 316-323) writes that "(the) Lord's grace can seem unfair... (the) mistake (of those first hired) is to think comparatively."

Is it our mistake to compare? We could spend all morning, and perhaps a lifetime, pondering the response of those first hired. If fairness is the point, they have a point. They work hard, in difficult circumstances. Whether in the field, or at the office, or in the family, or even at church, they, and we, do what's needed, diligently. And whether it's the reward of monetary compensation or the intangible reward of acceptance, they expect it, and receive it.

They could so easily be us, and perhaps they have been. We have received grace, unearned, unmerited. God has promised and we have received.

That's not the problem. The problem becomes when others, who worked less, not as long, not as hard, are rewarded with the same reward. That simply is not fair. So it is with grace.

So we could spend all morning, and perhaps a lifetime, pondering the response of those first hired, and the God who hired them. But my attention has drifted to that last group, the ones last hired, and the God who hired them as well. I thought of the *graceful truth that we are accepted* as I thought about them. They are, Bruner writes, "dehumanized...because they lack rewarding work."

I thought of the *graceful truth that we are accepted* as I read about Rwandan women, survivors of a horrific genocide, family members killed, themselves raped, infected with HIV, victims of abuse and trauma we could barely imagine. David Briggs writes that "Many people who have survived trauma such as rape or domestic violence have feelings of self-contempt or self-loathing, as if they were somehow responsible for the crimes committed against them..." Of the Rwandan women, he writes: "Sometimes it took a month or a full year before they spoke about their experiences with other survivors. When they did, even if it was only to say a few words before they broke down in tears, other survivors gathered around, embracing one another." (*Christian Century*, August 14, 2014) Considered last in the world's eye, accepted by a gracious and loving God.

I thought of the *graceful truth that we are accepted* as we spent nearly fourteen hours with Theodore and Eleanor and Franklin this past week. So many lessons to be drawn from Ken Burns' work. Because I

do what I do I paid attention to faith references, and there were but a few. FDR's prayer last night, drawn from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, for soldiers fighting. Teddy's condemnation of Wilson's "Presbyterian moralism." How dare he, I thought! But there were faith lessons throughout, about grief, about human shortcoming, about perseverance in the face of all kinds of hardship.

What also struck me was how these three, undeniably powerful in the world's eyes, spent large swaths of their lives feeling unaccepted, and unacceptable. At one point in his life, FDR could only find acceptance in Warm Springs, his leg braces removed, floating freely and without pain in a pool with other "polios," as they were called. And Eleanor, rejected by her early life, rejected by Franklin's infidelity, finding acceptance only with a small, mostly private circle of friends. Considered first in the world's eyes, powerful and elite, considered last in their own eyes, accepted by a gracious and loving God.

I thought of the *graceful truth that we are accepted* as I learned of the death of Robin Williams. His TV work consumed many hours of my childhood; his movies inspired and entertained me; and his guest spots with David Letterman and others left me laughing hard and in awe of his giftedness. And yet addiction, and, ultimately, depression, left him looking in the mirror unable to accept himself and his pathway forward. I found myself deeply sad, for Robin Williams and all who struggle so profoundly with depression. Not knowing his faith background at all, my prayer for him and all is that those who are depressed or addicted or lonely or isolated, who are unacceptable in their own eye, will somehow sense they are accepted by a gracious and loving God.

Part of the task of faith is to walk alongside of those who perceive themselves to be unaccepted and unacceptable –people with no means, little power, left out by the church and the world. They are accepted, we must insist to them. The poor, the different, the young, the weak. That is part of the task, and we are reminded of that this morning.

But there is another aspect of the parable this morning worth our attention. We are not Rwandan women, or political figures, or entertainers, but I do bet that even as there are moments when we identify with the workers first hired, we identify as well with those last hired.

Tillich is right. We *are* separated from others. We *are* separated from ourselves. And such separation separates us from God.

This morning Jesus reminds us that whenever we show up, and for however long we work, we are paid, welcomed, accepted. That's easy for the first-hired group to remember, though they get bent out of shape a bit this morning. It's much harder for the last-hired group to embrace, whether it's the people we so easily identify, or the people we see when we look in the mirror.

Accept that you are accepted, Tillich wrote. Know that you are welcome in my community, the owner said, credentials and experience notwithstanding, but simply because you are who you are.

Dale Bruner writes of the "(a)mazing grace of a Lord who lifts (the) lasts – the seemingly less effective, less fruitful little people and spiritual latecomers – into places of honor."

There will be moments when we are the worker that works a full day and is paid. That is called grace, simply because we are hired at all.

There will be moments when others are hired, late, and are paid for a full day. That is also called grace, and we need to get over it.

But there will be moments when we look in the mirror and sense brokenness and estrangement and separation. And the owner shows up, and sees in us, in our eyes, in our souls, something we cannot see ourselves, and says “you.” I choose you. That is called grace as well. And it is amazing. May we accept it. Amen.