

"Is God Fair? Do We Want Him to Be?"
Matthew 20:1-16

September 24, 2017

16th Sunday After Pentecost

It's born in us or it's bred into us from the earliest of ages. I'm talking about our intense desire for fairness. For those of you who have children, is not the third thing they learn to say (after "momma" and "dadda"), "That's not fair!"? From the very start, we want everything to be meticulously and consistently "fair". As children, we might complain about one piece of cake not being as big as the other piece of cake that our brother got and that's not fair. As teenagers, we might be upset that the grade we got in school wasn't fair or that the curfew and other rules our parents impose were not fair. Even as adults, we maintain a strict watch on fairness. We want to be treated fairly with regard to our wages, the prices we must pay for our needs, and so on. And, as adults, we not only complain when we think things are not fair, we sue somebody to make them fair.

So, when it comes to our relationship with God, we expect - perhaps even demand - that He be absolutely fair with us. But then Jesus goes and tells the parable in our Gospel for today which shows that God is unabashedly, unquestionably, and unashamedly unfair.

The story deals with a landowner who has a vineyard. He desires workers for that vineyard so early one morning, he goes out to find workers. Surprisingly, the workers of the village are apparently not seeking employment. Nevertheless, the landowner finds them. He contracts with some workers at 6:00 AM to work the next twelve hours for the standard wage: one denarius. The workers are content to receive this and begin working.

The landowner goes back to the marketplace around 9:00 AM and finds workers just standing around. He sends them to work in his vineyard. He promises them nothing but "whatever is right". Despite not having a firm contract as the first workers did, these workers willingly go. The landowner does the same thing about noon, 3:00 PM, and even at 5:00 PM, one short hour before the end of the work day. The landowner chooses these workers, places them to work in the vineyard with only the promise of receiving what is right.

At 6:00 PM, it is time to pay the workers their wages for the day. The landowner tells his foreman to pay first the wages of those hired last and then the wages of those hired first. Those who were hired late in the day, up until 5:00 PM were paid one denarius - the wage for a full day's work. Although the text doesn't tell us, they must have been shocked to have received such a generous wage. They knew they didn't deserve it. They must have been overjoyed, as I'm sure any of us would be if we worked one hour and got paid for a full day.

Those who had been hired first must have resented these latecomers from the very start. Here, they had worked hard all day in the heat of the sun and these guys just kept drifting in throughout the day. When the first workers then saw that the other workers were paid one denarius, you know what they were thinking. They surely

would get more. When they were also paid one denarius, they were upset and grumbled. They said, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day in the scorching heat." In other words, it wasn't fair!

But the landowner defended his behavior. He *had* been very fair and just. Had they not agreed to work the entire day for a denarius? Had they not been paid a denarius? He had treated them fairly. At the same time, the landowner defended his right to be generous with his property. He is certainly well within his rights to give away his money even to people who had been in the vineyard a short time. The first workers had no right to complain that the landowner was unjust or to be envious of him for his generosity.

Yet people may look at God and do exactly that: complain that He is unjust and be upset when He is merciful and gracious. Jesus told this parable in just such a situation where this was happening. The religious people of the day, led by such people as the Pharisees and Sadducees, had been very faithful in the Kingdom of heaven (or so they thought). God promised His blessings of forgiveness and eternal life. They expected, almost demanded, these things for their faithfulness. Yet, at the same time, they saw Jesus welcoming into the Kingdom of heaven prostitutes, tax collectors, and other notorious sinners. Even Gentiles were welcome by Jesus. And when they saw that these "Johnny come lately"s into the Kingdom of God were going to receive the same blessings that they as life long members of the Kingdom would receive, they were upset. They grumbled about it. They questioned Jesus' fairness and complained about His graciousness.

Perhaps this hits home for us, as well. Many of you out there (and in this pulpit) are life-long Lutherans. Some of you have been members of this congregation your entire lives. How do you react when God brings other people into His Kingdom at this place? They may be latecomers, not only to Christianity, but to the Lutheran church as well. Some may not have been as religious as you. Some may have come from questionable moral backgrounds.

What do you do? It is quite easy to look down on such people -- as the religious Jews looked down on the sinners and Gentiles that Jesus was bringing in; as the full day workers looked down on those late workers in the story. It is easy to think that such people and their participation in the kingdom should have some sort of probationary period before they receive all of God's great blessings. And, if they do receive God's love, His forgiveness, and eternal life, then we who have worked hard and long to build and maintain this church should somehow receive more, right? To paraphrase the full day workers in the story, how can these latecomers be made equal to us? How can God be so unfair? Doesn't God "get it"?

Oh, God gets it all right. He knows He is not being fair. But God has been much more unfair than that. He pulled off the worst case of inequity and unfair practice ever committed by anyone. God selected a good Man; not a man chosen randomly—but a specific Man chosen just because he was good. Then God arranged it so that this good Man would be falsely accused of numerous crimes that He never committed. He used Satan to accomplish this dirty deed, to persuade the good Man's closest friends

to betray Him and abandon him, to line up lying witnesses against Him, to stack the jury in a kangaroo court that had conspired to condemn the Man even before He was arrested. God allowed this innocent Man to be condemned to a horrible tortured death by being nailed to a cross – something He never deserved.

But this was not the end of God's unfair treatment of people. He managed to extend His unfair treatment to every human being who ever lived in a way *they* did not deserve. After condemning the innocent Man and silently standing by while He suffered and cried out to God in His abandonment; God announced to all, not just basically moral people and lifelong church members, but also to murderers, rapists, terrorists, robbers and thieves, liars and deceivers, adulterers and idolaters all—that they were forgiven for all their sins. He just pardoned them all and let them get off 'scott free' for eternity while condemning and shifting their punishment to this One Man His Son, Jesus Christ.

Seems unfair to torture the innocent to death and let the guilty go free, doesn't it? But it wasn't an injustice. In fact, God was very careful to make sure that the letter of the Law was upheld and fulfilled perfectly—not a single sin ever committed went unpunished—every sin was piled upon that One Man and He suffered the full penalty which the Law prescribed for them. The eternal Son suffered separation from the eternal Father on a cross to make an eternal sacrifice for every sin ever committed. Payment was made in full. God was perfectly fair.

And because God has been perfectly fair and just in dealing with sin without violating His holiness, He can now afford to be gracious and generous. He is able to forgive sin because it had been paid for by Jesus. He is able to open the gates of heaven to eternal life because the only thing keeping people out - sin - is no longer on their account. It has been accounted for by Christ. And God is able to do that for whomever He wants. As He said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." (Ex. 33:19). He can and does have mercy on religious people, faithful church members, and even life long Lutherans. At the same time, He can and does have mercy on latecomers - those who have spurned Him their entire lives, those who have questionable or immoral life styles, and even those who are brought into the kingdom of God at the eleventh hour.

The focus of the latter part of the parable is the reaction of the full day workers to the landowner's actions. This begs the question: what will be your reaction to God's actions? If you have been working in the vineyard of the Lord your entire life, will you be steamed that people less faithful than you and perhaps less moral than you can enter the vineyard at the last minute and receive the same blessings from God that you do? Or, will you rejoice that God is so merciful that no one on earth this side of heaven is beyond being brought into His vineyard no matter how unreligious or immoral they might be at any given time in their lives?

In the parable, ALL the workers received their denarius, not because they walked into the vineyard or came seeking the landowner, but because the landowner found them and called them into the vineyard, even though it was at different times. None of them ultimately deserved that finding and that calling. All should be happy.

In the same way, none of us - from life long church member to last minute convert - deserves to be in the Kingdom of heaven. It is all because of God's calling and placing. Instead of grumbling about who got into the Kingdom of heaven when, let us rejoice that God has found all of us, brought all of us into His Kingdom, and blessed all of us the same, regardless of whether He did it when we were baptized as infants, confirmed as youths, instructed as adults or, whether He will do it for some late in life or even on their death beds.

The story is told about a person who was tried and convicted of a capital offense and was sentenced to death. After sentence was passed in this long and bitter trial, the defendant's lawyer, in an attempt to plead for his client's life, said, "Your Honor, all my client asks for is justice." The judge replied calmly, "You don't want justice. The court has given you justice. What you really want is mercy. And that is something this court has no right to give." In God's court of perfect justice, He is able to do both. He was just and fair with Jesus in dealing with your sin so that He could be merciful and gloriously unfair with you in granting you full forgiveness and everlasting life. Do we really want God to be fair? No, we do not. Is God unfair? You bet He is! He is merciful to us when you don't deserve it. And whether you are a life long Lutheran or a relatively recent convert, thank God He is! Amen.