

Matthew 20:1-16

Pentecost 18; October 3, 2020

All of us are born with a natural instinct for what is fair. Without ever being taught, we seem to know when we are not being treated equally with others. Even young children are experts at fairness. *"How come her dessert is bigger than mine? That's not fair!" "He got to spend more time on the computer than I did. That's not fair!"* As a parent you learn really fast that if you give your child a snack, it better be the same size, the same color and the same everything, or you will hear the words: *"It's not fair."*

If we think this idea of having everything being fair is only found in children, we're kidding ourselves. If you are still working, do you like your job? If you do, that is great. One of the most common reasons that people don't like their job is that they feel as if they are being treated unfairly. If you ever have been in the position that you are doing more work than someone else and they are getting paid the same as you, then you can understand the thought of *"It's not fair."*

We live in a world that likes to have everything being fair. Where this becomes particularly dangerous, however, is when we try to apply the idea of fairness to our relationship with God. Demanding fairness from God amounts to telling God what He should and shouldn't do. Demanding fairness from God is to take ourselves and our standards and put them higher than God, to make God fit our requirements of how we think He should act. And to do that is not only foolish and arrogant, it is idolatrous; it is to make ourselves into gods above God. So, this morning, let us take a look at what Jesus has to teach us about being fair.

To understand why Jesus tells this parable, we need to look back into chapter 19 of Matthew. A well-off young man comes up to Jesus and asks him a really big question. He asks: **"Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"** So, Jesus gives him two answers: 1. **"If you want to enter life, keep the commandments."** 2. **"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."** Jesus could look into this man's heart, and he could see that he just couldn't do it and he walks away.

Then the wheels in the minds of the disciples begin to turn. *If all we have to do is walk away from all our possessions and follow Jesus, we have done that.* For almost 3 years they have been doing that. Peter as the spokesman asks the question: **"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"** What's surprising is that Jesus gives them an answer. **"Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."** *All right, Jesus. Now you are talking, Jesus. This is what we have been waiting for.*

But before their egos can get too big, he wants to pop them and says to them that the only reason that you are getting this is because I have called you to them. You haven't done anything to deserve it. In fact, you have done so much to keep yourselves from them. Then he tells them this parable of our text. The picture that Jesus paints for them in this parable would be very familiar to them. There would be times, when the work was light and easy. A owner would need more help when it came to harvest time, however. When a vineyard owner needed help, he would go into the marketplace in the city and hire day labor. This work was hard. The wage that this owner was offering for a day's labor was good pay. These workers quickly agree to the wage and get to work.

But then this is where the story begins to paint a different picture from what they normally would see. The owner would go to the marketplace to hire more workers four more times that day. What's really fascinating in this account, nowhere does Jesus ever say that the owner needed more help. In fact, you get the feeling that it is the exact opposite. This owner was a generous man. You can't help but wonder that as this owner looked at these laborers, he saw men who needed a job. He saw families that needed to be provided for. His heart was just breaking for them. This parable is often called the parable of *The workers in the vineyard*, but perhaps it could be called *The parable of the compassionate employer*.

That's really the point of this parable is, isn't it. This employer is God. He looks at the people of this world and has compassion on them. He sees people who need only what he can provide for them – his grace. The first group of workers was hired at 6am. They would usually work for 12 hours. How else can you explain that the owner would hire

someone for less than an hour at the end of the day? If this owner goes back 5 times to hire more workers, you can't help but wonder if these men in the last group were actually there all day. The owner asks them: **'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'** **"Because no one has hired us," they answered.** Instead of calling them out, the owner says to them: **'You also go and work in my vineyard.'**

It gets to the end of the day, it would be time to pay everyone before they went home. Usually, if you worked a longer day, you were paid first. But not in this parable. The guys that had been there for 1 hour get paid first. They get a denarius. They leave. The next group gets paid a denarius. Can you imagine what those men who worked for 12 hours began to think what they would get paid. They were the longest and worked the hardest. These guys are doing the math in their heads. Finally, the foreman got to them and hands them each a denarius. *What! Come on. We should be getting more than what those only worked one hour.* **"When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'"** In other words, *"It's not fair!"*

"I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Jesus wanted to teach them a lesson about the relationship that they had with Jesus. I think we can sympathize with these 6 AM workers. This just doesn't seem fair does it? It doesn't seem fair that I can have a relationship with Jesus my whole life, and someone will get the same reward if they are brought to faith right before their lost breath. *It's not fair!* That's what Jesus wanted to teach them. The kingdom of heaven doesn't operate in the same way the kingdom of the world. In fact, it operates at times the exact opposite. That's why Jesus says: **"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."**

That's what the kingdom of heaven is all about. It's about Jesus and what Jesus has done for us. It is about Jesus not being fair. He doesn't give us what we deserve. Instead he gives us crown. This landowner sent his Son to this world and put all our sins on him. Jesus got what he didn't deserve. Instead what we get is called Grace. Let's give thanks that God isn't fair and poured out his Grace on us. Amen.