

September 24, 2023

Matthew 20:1-16

“The Lord Is Generous!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

People in our country pride themselves on believing in fairness. It is a key word in our way of life and has become extremely controversial as there are so many different definitions of fairness. These definitions are clashing and creating tremendous division in our country. Most of the chaos in our day which culminates in the cry: “that’s unfair!” is actually driven by people’s envy and jealousy. And we’ll get to that in a moment.

The disciples of Jesus were also concerned about fairness. In fact, right before our gospel lesson for today Peter asks Jesus: “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Peter is concerned about fairness. First Jesus addresses the apostles and then he makes the remark that reaches us: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” It’s that final sentence of Jesus, the “*first will be last, and the last first,*” that opens up a parable to clarify how the Lord views fairness, and it’s not what we expect.

The Lord’s understanding of fairness is different than our human understanding of fairness. The Lord declares in our Old Testament lesson: “... my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways ... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” The Lord is not like one of us. He does not treat people according to our standards of fairness, and we should be very thankful for that truth. Like I said a moment ago, all of this opens up a parable to clarify how the Lord views fairness. Jesus’ parable is about hours of labor in a vineyard, and the grumbling of some of the workers.

We are told that at six o’clock one morning a man went out to hire workers for his vineyard. He and the workers agreed on the pay: a silver coin worth a full day’s labor. At nine o’clock he sees some men who are idle and hires them saying, “whatever is right I will give you,” and so they go to work. Again, at noon and at three in the afternoon, he does the same with others. Even at five o’clock he goes out one more time to search for workers and says to some of them, “Why do you stand here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” So the master of the vineyard said to them, “You go into the vineyard too.”

At the end of the day, the master of the vineyard tells his manager to call in the workers to pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired late in the day. They receive a silver coin worth a full day’s labor. When those first hired in the early morning saw this, they thought to themselves that they should receive more than what was promised at the beginning of the day. However, they also received only a silver coin worth a full day’s labor. With this they grumbled at the master of the vineyard saying, “These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But the master of the vineyard replied to one of them saying, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a silver coin worth a full day’s labor? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

The point of the parable is that everyone gets a silver coin with a full day's labor. The compensation is equal for everyone. In the same way, the Lord gives his goodness equally to all who have been received into the vineyard of his church and bear the fruits of faith. We have been brought into the vineyard through Jesus Christ. In his cross and empty tomb, the Lord's loving kindness is given in equal measure to all, regardless of how long each Christian has been bearing fruit. Whether you are an apostle Paul or a thief on the cross, you get the whole silver coin of Paradise.

Most people's idea of fairness is based on the work ethic which says, "You get what you deserve." Consequently, those who entered the vineyard early in the morning and worked all day thought that they should get more than those who came in at five o'clock! "That isn't fair!" grumbled the early birds. And your right. The kingdom of God isn't fair. If you want fair, "the wages of sin is death." None of us should be in the vineyard of the kingdom of heaven in the first place, if you really want fairness.

The Lord works on the principle of grace which says, "You get what you do *not* deserve." A gift has been given to you for which you did not work. That, after all, is what a gift truly is, as Paul writes in Romans 6:23, "... the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." In Jesus, you receive everything that the master of the vineyard has to offer, no matter how long or how much you've labored in his vineyard! Far be it from any one of us to grumble at the Lord's generosity! With that in mind, the parable is really about **a generous Lord!** And he reserves that right, for there is nothing that we have that has not been given. In him is pure goodness, and again Paul writes (Rom. 11:35-36), "... who has given him a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever (Rom. 11:36)." The Lord does what he does solely out of his divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in us. Our lives are a picture of grace.

Jeffrey A. Gibbs, in his commentary on *Matthew 11:2-20:34*, writes:

The essential point of the parable is expressed in [the workers'] lament, "you made them equal to us" (20:12). There is the rub: the Lord makes no distinction between his workers. This is what is offensive, even scandalous, about the story that Jesus tells the apostles ... A problem only emerges when the employees start comparing themselves to their fellows. In this little story, however, all comparisons are odious [disgusting], and such comparing reveals the danger of an envious and evil spirit (20:15).

You might recall that I said at the beginning of the sermon that most of the chaos in our day which culminates in the cry: "that's unfair!" is actually driven by people's envy and jealousy. Indeed, the core sin problem in the parable is envy, which is defined as a "painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage." It is certain that much of our society and the unbelieving world is full of a "painful or resentful awareness" of that which is unfair. But, the Christian is supposed to think differently. The Christian doesn't need to run around seeking personal fairness and justice. Why? Because a Christian has been emptied of the self, and is filled with the goodness of the Lord who has given the whole silver coin of Paradise. Nevertheless, there is that sinful side of us that gets roiled when someone has an advantage that we think we deserve.

I am reminded of the story that Oscar Wilde once told of a hermit who was so holy that the evil spirits sent to tempt him were discouraged. Satan himself decided to take over. With scorn on his lips he said to the demons, “Your methods are crude. Permit me one moment.” With that, he went up to the holy hermit and opened up the conversation: “Have you heard the good news? Your brother has been made bishop of Alexandria!” It was too much for the holy man. Envy swept over him like a mighty flood.

And that’s all it takes for any of us. And from envy comes hatred. This should not be the case for the Christian, because the Christian is described as one who has everything in Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. We have the peace of God which passes all understanding. This will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. As Paul writes of himself in the context of this peace, so are we to follow: “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Phil. 4:7, 11-13).”

This unbelieving world is so preoccupied with fairness that it cannot understand the things that we have learned in our parable of the hours in the vineyard. They are fully occupied with considering what they have, and what they don’t have in comparison with others. We would do well to listen to the words of Jesus in that moment when Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”

And there you have it. Follow Jesus! Do not worry about this, that, and the other thing. Paul writes in Colossians 3:1-4, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” Indeed! **The Lord is Generous!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott