

Pentecost 16

September 20, 2020

## **It's Not Fair! But That's Grace!**

### **Matthew 20:1-16**

“It’s not fair!” is always an angry cry. It’s a complaint that someone or some group has acted unjustly, and a demand that that injustice be corrected. If a little child bursts into tears and sobs “It’s not fair” on seeing another child get a bigger piece of cake, we know what is meant.

But maybe “It’s not fair” can be good news. Maybe fairness is sometimes the last thing a person should really want.

“It’s not fair!” is the cry from the men in Jesus’ parable who had worked all day in the vineyard. And they seem to have a point. They had been in the marketplace before the sun was up, expecting to put in a full day’s work. They’d toiled from six in the morning till six in the evening on a hot day — only to see those people who arrived an hour before quitting time get paid the same amount that the real workers got. What’s the point of putting in a full day’s work when others get the same amount for “loafing”? It’s not fair!

“It’s not fair!” We heard the same cry from Jonah. He had to see the wicked people of Nineveh spared any punishment for their crimes. Jonah had tried to keep that from happening by running away when God told him to go to that city to proclaim God’s judgment because he was afraid that the soft-hearted old Lord would let the Ninevites off easy if they repented. But God brought Jonah back, and when he preached, they did repent, and God didn’t destroy the city. So, Jonah yelled at God, “I knew you’d do something like this, treating these lousy pagans like good religious people! It’s not fair!”

The workers in Jesus’ parable represent the good, religious people who have tried all their lives to be faithful to the God of Israel. They’ve tried to obey the law of Moses and to do their duty. And this Jesus comes along welcoming crooked tax collectors and prostitutes and saying that they can get into the kingdom of heaven after lives of ignoring God’s commandments. How is that fair?

For that matter, some of the Christians that Matthew's gospel was written for probably felt the same way. They had grown up as faithful Jews and had sacrificed a lot when they came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. And now here are these gentile converts — pagan idolaters just the day before yesterday — who are claiming to be just as good church members as they were. It's not fair.

And sometimes we may say that to ourselves. We've tried to be faithful, worshiping regularly and taking on tasks to get things done in our church. Then we're told about the first being last and the last first, prodigals being welcomed, and the shepherd leaving the flock to go and find the one who got lost. We want to be gracious and welcome sinners who see the light. But sometimes we think, "Doesn't staying where we belong and doing what we're supposed to do, coming to church, and serving on committees or teaching children, count for anything?"

Well, if Jesus had just been telling a story about workers in a vineyard, the ones who had worked all day would be right. In ordinary business dealings, the owner would be unfair, and the workers would have a right to complain. In the 9-to-5 world, you expect that those who put in a full day's work will get paid more than those who do much less at the same job, and Jesus isn't arguing with that.

The owner's words in the parable — "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" — are not a justification for unfair labor practices.

But the owner of the vineyard is God. We're told at the very beginning that the story is about the kingdom of heaven. That's what the other gospels call "the kingdom of God." And in that kingdom, things are very different than in our earthly economies. If it were a matter of earning entrance into that kingdom fair and square, nobody would get in. All of us would be out of luck, hard workers and loafers, pious people and skeptics.

If you demand fairness from God in a strict economic sense, you may be unpleasantly surprised. You'll hear words like those of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Though we are to follow and strive to be like the perfect example God gives us in Jesus, none of us will be perfect in this life. Ninety-nine percent is still imperfect. It kind of puts a new twist on the saying "If you have to ask how much it costs, you can't afford it."

But what makes the kingdom of heaven different isn't just that it's tremendously valuable but that it costs nothing to get in. The people of Nineveh repented, and God forgave them. The latecomers in the parable came into the vineyard at the last hour and got a day's wage. The thief on the cross was assured by Jesus that he'd be with him in Paradise. None of them earned what they got. It was pure grace.

The kingdom of heaven is a gift, but not a cheap gift. The price of it, the labor that goes into making it a reality, is the life of the Son of God.

Jesus told this parable as he and his disciples were on the way to Jerusalem, and in the very next verses that follow, he takes the disciples aside to tell them what will happen there: "The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised."

That is the cost of the kingdom of heaven. It is not cheap. But it is given freely to all who hear and believe the promise that God gives us in Jesus Christ. Since it is a gift, since we don't earn our way in, complaining about what could be perceived as unfairness when others get in badly misses the point. God is much more than fair. God is incredibly gracious.

All of those who have come to faith, early or late, are saints, God's holy ones. This doesn't necessarily mean that in the fullness of the kingdom of heaven all the saints will be identical. In a passage in one of his letters, Paul seems to suggest that all whose lives are based on Jesus Christ will be saved, but that they may receive different rewards depending on how well those lives have been lived. But by then we will be beyond worrying about who's number one and who's number one billion.

Okay, it's free. We're saved by grace. Then what are we working for? Why are we coming to church? Why are we praying and worshiping and serving and giving?

We aren't working to earn our way into the kingdom of heaven. But we are called to work. (It's a bit like a student who has been given a scholarship to a university so she can be diligent at her studies, not so she can loaf or party.)

We should be working, with the Spirit's guidance, to follow Jesus more closely. And we are called to work so that those standing idly in the religious marketplace, or the people of today's Nineveh, those who've never really heard the gospel or those who have become disillusioned with the church, can be part of the kingdom. Our labor is to share the good news of freedom through Christ's death and resurrection, and our reward for that will be that outsiders become insiders.

Because the kingdom of God isn't to be an exclusive club for a few people. "I, when I am lifted up from the earth," Jesus said, "will draw all people to myself." We are given the gift not only of citizenship in the heavenly city but of being instruments through whom God brings others into it. And as the prophet Daniel says, "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."