

JUST NOT FAIR

Matthew 20:1-16

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

September 20, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 20, verses 1 through 16. It's a parable that doesn't seem fair, but it is just. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 20, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹²saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Justice and fairness.

God is just. That means he always does what is right. He does what is good. He never does what is wrong. He is never unjust. He does not punish anyone without a just reason. Nor does he reward anyone without a just reason. He always does what is right. God is just.

And he is also generous. He gives us far more than we deserve. He gives eternal riches when we deserve nothing. He forgives sins and grants everlasting salvation when we deserve condemnation and death. God is generous.

God is just, and he is generous.

Sometimes these attributes seem to conflict with each other, like in this parable. We can practically hear the workers say, “That’s just not fair!” Their exact words are, “**These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat**” (20:12). That’s just not fair.

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God is just, but he might not always be fair, at least not the way we define fairness. Justice and fairness are not quite the same thing. Or, at least, I'm the preacher, so I get to define the words, and I'm going to define them so that they mean slightly different things. Justice is a Bible word, so I'm going to define it the way the Bible uses it. It means "rightness." To be just means that a person is right and always does what is right. God is just. That's the way the Bible uses the word.

But I think we use the word "fair" a little differently. To be fair means that you treat people equally or according to what they deserve. Children are really good at telling grownups what is or isn't fair. If you're giving gifts, you need to give gifts to all the children, and you have to make them equal in value.

At Christmas time when I was growing up, my parents had to make sure each child received the same number of gifts and that the total monetary value given to each child was equal, because we knew. If there was a kid's version of "The Price Is Right," where all the items are toys, we would have dominated. We practically had that JC Penney catalog memorized. Fairness in gift-giving was a big deal. And when it comes to gifts, fairness means equality.

But when it comes to wages, fairness means something else. When it comes to wages, fairness means that each person gets what they deserve. Suppose dad says, "After you mow the lawn, I'll take you to Dairy Queen." But then he takes your brother and your sister too. Well that's just not fair. Or maybe you have a coworker who squeezes an extra five minutes out of every break and plays games on his phone when the boss isn't looking. But you both get the same raise. That's just not fair.

Here's the thing with fairness: we're usually only concerned with fairness when we're not getting what we want. You know what I mean? The real issue is that we just want stuff for ourselves. When we're getting more than someone else, that doesn't bother us. But if we get less, or even the same amount, when we feel like we have a right to more, that's when we get concerned with fairness. Does your dad have the right to take your brother and sister to Dairy Queen? Yes, of course. That means that his action is just, even if you don't think it's fair.

God is just. He always does what is right. He never does what is wrong. And there is always a just reason for what he does. If he rewards a person, he always has a just reason. And if he condemns a person, he always has a just reason.

This makes the Kingdom of Heaven seem backward. There are so many things that just seem out of place or out of order according to this world.

The source of this is the cross. The cross is where Jesus came into his kingdom (Luke 23:42-43). The cross is where he was crowned. His coronation involved, not a crown of gold, but of thorns. His glorious moment is ugly. It looks like suffering and death and losing ... because it is. He suffers. He dies. He loses. And this is backward.

No other king reigns like this. He loses in order to win. He suffers in order to have joy. And he dies in order to live and reign. This is backward. This is the exact opposite of what we see in all the kingdoms of this world, or at least the ones that survive and thrive. When Kings go into battle, they try to win. And whenever a king dies, that is the end of his reign, not the beginning.

King Jesus came to defeat sin, death, and the devil for us. But his victory doesn't look anything like a victory. It looks like losing. He defeats sin by becoming sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). He conquers death by dying. As he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30), it looked as if the devil had won. Or, at least, for a few days it looked that way.

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In what looked like such a devastating loss, our King defeated our three greatest enemies of sin, death, and the devil. But in this dark and depressing event our King fulfilled the Law, accomplished our salvation, and established his Kingdom.

And the Kingdom of Heaven continues to look backward. Jesus says, **“The last will be first, and the first will be last”** (20:16).

This parable is for all who love glory. It is for everyone who wants the biggest reward. Jesus tells this parable against the disciples.

A lot of Jesus’ parables are antagonistic in nature. Many of them are spoken against the scribes and Pharisees, but this one is spoken against his own disciples. So it also applies to the members of his Church. It applies to you and to me. It applies to those of us who sit here in church and have an evil eye toward anyone who comes in after us.

While this parable certainly teaches the extravagant grace of Jesus, the primary purpose of it is to rebuke the disciples.

At the end of chapter nineteen. Peter says to Jesus, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (19:27).

It’s a selfish question. That’s easy to see. But it must have been burning a hole in the disciples’ minds. They had been following Jesus around for about three years now, listening to him preach about the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven sounds great for everyone who gets in, but what about those guys who got in on the ground floor? This is like investing in Amazon twenty years ago, and you really can’t help but wonder what your investment will be worth in another twenty years.

So Peter’s question is straight-up selfish, but it’s what all the disciples were thinking. And it’s what you and I would be thinking too. So Jesus isn’t too hard on them. He doesn’t rebuke them right away. He actually gives them a very gracious answer at first. He starts with the reward before he gets to the rebuke. He says, **“In the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 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.”** (19:28-29)

This is very promising. Jesus really does have a special reward for the Twelve. Their reward will be extravagant.

But Jesus doesn’t want them to compare themselves to everyone who comes later, because he is going to reward them too—apparently just as much as these first disciples.

So Jesus turns the conversation and says, **“But many who are first will be last, and the last first”** (19:30).

Then he tells them this parable about the owner of a vineyard who runs his business all backward.

At the break of dawn he hires a bunch of workers and promises to pay them one denarius. That was a typical day’s wage. It was a fair price.

And then, at the third, sixth, and ninth hours—that would be roughly equivalent to nine o’clock, noon, and three in the afternoon. Daybreak is about 6 am, so we just add six hours to convert it to our time. The third hour is nine o’clock. The sixth hour is noon, and the ninth hour is three in the afternoon. At each of these hours the master goes back to the marketplace to hire more workers. And he doesn’t tell them exactly what he will pay them. He says, **“Whatever is**

right I will give you” (20:4). Or another way to translate that is, “Whatever is *just* I will give you.” Remember that word.

The workers were just standing idle. That means they’re not doing anything. They’re actually kind of lazy. But the owner hires them anyway to work in his vineyard. As the day progresses the new hires are lazier and lazier. The man is obviously trying to hire as many workers as possible. He’ll take anyone. He just wants them in the vineyard. So it makes us wonder, where were these guys earlier? Why didn’t they get hired at 6 am? They’re day laborers. This is how they make a living. They know that if you want a day’s wages, you actually have to work for a whole day.

But these are the guys who sleep in until nine o’clock, noon, or even three in the afternoon. These are the guys who hit the snooze button until the snooze button gives up. Then they have a bowl of cereal at noon. Then they lay on the couch and stare at their tablets. But back then tablets were just flat rocks, so it’s kind of boring. Finally they go look for work, you know, to at least make it look like they are trying to do something with their day.

And someone actually hires them!

Even at the eleventh hour, the owner of the vineyard is in the marketplace, looking for more workers. They had twelve-hour workdays back then, so these guys didn’t put themselves out for hire until the last hour. No one in their right mind would hire these guys. But the owner of the vineyard goes to the marketplace, finds them, and sends them into his vineyard.

At the end of the hour, or what was a full day for some of the workers, the foreman lines them up from last to first. The owner of the vineyard told him to do it this way. It’s like he wants the first workers to see what he’s doing.

The owner of the vineyard reveals himself to be a very backward thinking Lord and perhaps a poor businessman. He gives these last workers a denarius—a full day’s wages! They didn’t do that much work. They did not earn their pay.

Then, to those who worked three, six, or nine hours, he gives one denarius. Even to those who worked twelve hours, he still gives only one denarius.

The parable ends after the day, but what do you think would have happened the next day? There would be fewer workers in the marketplace at 6 am, and a lot more looking for work at 5 pm. If the master is going to pay you the same either way, you might as well stare at a rock all day.

What is the owner thinking? This is no way to run a business. It’s like he doesn’t even care about profits. It’s like he doesn’t care about getting any work done! The only thing this master cares about is paying his workers. He is doing a great job of running his business ... if his goal is to give away his money.

But this, of course, is exactly what he is trying to do.

And this reveals something about God and his Kingdom. God does not bring us into his Kingdom because he needs us there. He brings us in because we need to be there. He brings us in because he wants to reward us, regardless of whether or not his Kingdom gains any benefit from our work. He is all about giving. He is all about forgiving. Lazy people—deficient people—sinners—God is generous to them. That is what grace means.

But you might be thinking, doesn’t that open the Lord up to have his generosity abused?

Well, yeah. Of course it does! But that’s his problem, and he seems to be okay with it.

He is allowed to do what he wants with what is his. And he chooses to be generous. He chooses to reward people who do not deserve to be rewarded.

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This, of course, is all backward. You can't run a business this way. No one could rule a country this way. This principle of generosity is not transferable to the kingdoms of the world, and everybody knows it. But this is how God rules his Kingdom.

The Kingdom of Heaven is straight-up backward, and Jesus wants his disciples to know this.

He promised them a great reward. He promised them thrones (19:28). He said they would receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life (19:29). But Jesus will reward other people too—people who really don't deserve it.

Peter wanted to make sure their sacrifice would be worth it. He wanted to make sure the life of discipleship is a valuable life choice. And it is. Jesus assures them that it is. But he tells them this parable to give them a heads-up that everyone will get that same reward. It's like everyone who buys Amazon stock always gets it at the 1997 price. That would be no way to run the New York Stock Exchange, but that is how God rules his Kingdom.

Yes, the Twelve will have a great reward; that is a certainty. But that criminal who finds God hanging one cross over, or the lazy bum who meets the Lord of the Vineyard at the eleventh hour, they will too.

So when you hear Jesus say to the scum of the earth, “**Today you will be with me in paradise**” (Luke 23:43), do not think you will receive some greater paradise. You will receive everything the Lord of the Vineyard promises you. But do not compare yourself to the lazy bums who show up at the end of the day.

Do not compare yourself to the hypocritical sinners sitting in the pew on the other side of the church. You don't deserve your reward any more than they do.

Don't compare. It doesn't matter. How much work you do and how much work someone else does is completely irrelevant. It doesn't matter, because in the Kingdom of Heaven, no one gets paid for the work they do.

This may not seem fair. But it is just. Remember, God always has a good reason for the rewards he gives out. But the basis of the reward has nothing to do with anything we have done or any goodness within us. The reward is based solely on the work of Jesus Christ. You may think you are better than others. You may not steal, you may not sleep around. Maybe you fast twice a week and tithe ten percent (Luke 18:11). Your reward is based on none of this. Your reward is based on the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ. He fulfilled the Law on your behalf. He bled and died for your sake. He is the just reason for your reward.

Or maybe you've done all the horrible things and none of the good things. Your reward is based on none of this. Your reward is based on the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ. He fulfilled the Law on your behalf. He bled and died for your sake. He is the just reason for your reward.

This is just, but maybe not fair. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.