

God Is Unfair (Thankfully)
Matthew 20:1-16
Septuagesima
February 7 - 8, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Between Girard and Virden Illinois

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

All of us are born with a natural instinct for what is fair. Without ever being taught, we seem to know when the treatment isn't equal. 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!" And it's the same for us adults, too. All of us have heard people say at one time or another, "Life just isn't fair."

I've noticed that whenever we bring up the issue of fairness, it's almost always because we're promoting our own interests. "Management should be paying me more; my wages are unfair." "Hey, I was next in line; it's not fair that you're serving him first." "I shouldn't have to do all this work; you should take your fair share of the responsibility." Sometimes our complaints are justified; often they are simply an expression of greed or selfishness or laziness.

Where this becomes particularly dangerous, however, is when we try to apply the idea of fairness to our relationship with God. Because for us to demand fairness from God is for us to tell God what He should and shouldn't do. It is for us 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 arrogant, it is idolatrous; it is to make ourselves into gods above God.

Beware! Fairness comes under the category of God's Law. God's Law is about justice. It's about getting what you deserve. And for the sinner who has fallen short of the Law, justice means judgment. "The wages of sin," what you've earned by our works, "is death." You'd better think twice before you ask God to be fair with you. Fairness is what the devil wants. Fairness is hell. But God does not wish to deal with you according to His justice, His fairness, but according to His mercy in Christ, in the manner of a gift. The

Gospel is unfair, and that is very good news indeed. For in God's unfairness is His love towards you. You are "declared righteous freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

That ultimately is the real difference between the first and the last in today's Gospel parable. The first laborers had an agreement, a contract with the landowner to work for a denarius a day. The other laborers, however, weren't operating under any legal terms. Rather, the landowner simply said, "Go into the vineyard, and whatever is right, I will give you." So the first were dealing with the landowner on the basis of what was fair; the last were dealing with him on the basis of trust in his goodness. The first were relying on their own works; the last were relying on the landowner's righteousness, and in so doing, they received more than they ever expected or deserved.

The owner of the vineyard in this parable is God the Father. By His Word and Spirit He sends out the call of the Gospel to come into His vineyard, which is the church, and for His people to be about the things pertaining to the holy Vine of Christ. Some come into the church from the first moments of their life, baptized as infants, remaining faithful their entire lives. Others are converted as adults. Some aren't brought to faith in Christ the Savior until their lives are almost over. Some are full of good works. Others are full of weakness and failure who yet cling to Christ. But God gives all the same thing at the end of the day: full forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, everlasting life with Him in heaven. He does this not because He is unfair, but rather, because He is generous and loving and merciful. He pours out His gifts on His people abundantly and lavishly. For the reward at the end of the day is given not based on our work but on the work of His Son, who lived and died and was raised again for us.

The problem arises when some in the vineyard of the church begin to think that their length of time and their service deserves some special reward, who want God to work on the merit system. For that destroys the relationship of love that God wishes to have with His people. Love has nothing to do with what is owed or deserved. Real love is a freely given gift with no strings attached. As soon as we start wanting to deal with God on the basis of what He owes us, it is no longer a relationship of love, but in the end a business relationship-you do for me, I'll do for you. To treat God like that is not to love Him but to use Him.

Those who want to deal with God on the basis of their own works and measurements of equality will be sent away from His presence forever, as the landowner said to the first workers, **“Go your way.”** Hell has been rightly described as the place where the damned suffer the anguish of growing infinitely more angry with God at His unfairness. But those who give up trying to deal with God on their own terms and instead rely on His goodness and mercy—they will receive from Him much more than they ever expected or deserved. If hell is the place where there is anger and weeping and anguish at God’s supposed unfairness, then heaven is the place where God’s people laugh and sing and rejoice in God’s unfairness—where they experience the ever-growing joy of the undeserved love and goodness and life that the Lord causes to abound to His people.

That is the difference between unbelief and faith. Unbelievers seek a God who is fair, and when they find Him, they don’t like Him. Believers seek a God who is merciful and gracious, and when He finds them, they love Him. Believers know that it is only by grace that they are even in the vineyard, no matter how long they’ve been there. They consider it a privilege and an honor to be able to contribute to the health and the growth of the vineyard. They are not jealous of the newcomer or of the one converted in his dying days, but they rejoice that the same mercy that saved themselves has also saved another. Even a faithful lifelong Christian recognizes that of himself he deserves nothing and that it is only because of Jesus that he has forgiveness and life. As it is written, **“The free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 6:23).

It is as we prayed in the Introit, **“The Lord will save the humble people, but will bring down proud and haughty looks.”** Or as Jesus said, **“The last will be first, and the first last.”** Repentant thieves and prostitutes enter the kingdom of heaven while unrepentant Pharisees are excluded. The contrite new believer is at the front of the line while the self-righteous lifetime member is at the end. The self-sufficient are cut off. The humble beggars are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

“The last will be first, and the first last.” For that is the way of Christ. He who is the first and the greatest humbled Himself to be the last and lowest on the holy cross. He was treated unfairly so that you would be treated graciously. He Himself was the one who did the work in the vineyard that brings you the generous reward at the end of the day. Consider the times mentioned in this parable. Christ was handed over to Pontius Pilate at dawn. He was crucified at the third hour of the day.

Darkness covered the land at the sixth hour, noon. Our Lord died at the ninth hour as the perfect and complete sacrifice for your sin. He was buried at the eleventh hour of the day just before sundown. Jesus Christ is the true Laborer in the vineyard, that you may be living, fruitful branches of Him who is the Vine.

And now that the day's work has been done, Christ directs His stewards, His pastors, to give to you your denarius, the denarius of Christ's life and salvation, which He bestows through His baptism and His preaching and His supper. Only do not despise this denarius as those did in the parable, and thus miss out on its benefit. Rather, receive this denarius with faith and thanksgiving. Trust that behind the poor elements of the Word and the Sacraments, the Lord imparts rich blessing—not because He has to or because it's fair, but simply because He delights in being generous and loving towards you.

This is the true way of the Gospel, the way of undeserved grace. It is the way of Him who is Himself the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, Jesus Christ, the Savior. Those who have His Gospel have everything they need.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.