

MARCH 16/17

LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew 20:1-16; Psalm 16:5-8

1<sup>st</sup> MARSHALL

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*Dear friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe, and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*



The parable of the workers in the vineyard, like most other parables, usually provokes a strong reaction among those who hear or read it.

-The story is simple and easy to understand.

-Yet the issues it raises are complex and very challenging to understand.

So here's the question to ask right off the bat: what is this story about?

The owner of a vineyard goes to the marketplace at 6:00 a.m. where the day-laborers gather. There he hires a crew to work at the usual daily wage. It must have been an amazingly abundant crop of grapes, so much so that the man hires another crew at 9:00 a.m. and promises to pay them "whatever is right."

Perhaps, then, the owner opens the weather app on his phone and sees that the evening will bring a freeze. He knows that his crop will be ruined if he doesn't harvest it all before sundown. For he returns to the marketplace again at noon, at 3, and once again at 5, hiring full crews each and every time.

At 6:00 p.m. when the whistle blows, all the workers line up to receive their pay. We can't see the man's face, but perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, the owner tells his manager to pay the latecomers...first.

Those who were in the last group hired,  
 who worked just one measly hour,  
 who hardly did enough to even break a sweat, are amazed to find that they are paid a **whole day's wage!!!**

The same is true for every group as they move through the line. So when those who worked the **live long** day appear, they figure that the boss is really gonna give them something special...

Then they look in their envelopes and see... what they had agreed would be a good wage for the day...and that makes them grumble, makes them envious, makes them angry...

I can just picture them growling to one another, saying, THAT'S NOT FAIR!

And they would be right, no??

Is life supposed to be **fair**?

All who say YES, please raise your hands.

All who say NO, please...hold your nose...



So why is it that pretty much everything we learn **in Kindergarten**, **on the playground**, **at home** and **in Sunday School** (or TLC as we know it here), why do all of these basic entities affirm the fallacy that life should be fair – or, at the very least, that we should strive to make life fair...??

My wife, Carolyn, youngest of three, only daughter, always tried to get her mom to admit that Lenore loved her daughter just a little bit more than she loved the boys. I'm sure that you could all tell me exactly what Lenore's response was to Carolyn:

***I love you all the same!***

The problem, of course, is trying to define what's fair in every situation. At Bible and Brew last Thursday we talked about how parents strive to maintain fairness, for example, in the gifts they give their kids for Christmas.

One family strove for fairness by making sure that each child received the same NUMBER of gifts. While another made sure that the TOTAL DOLLAR VALUE spent on each child was the same.

From a very early age, we have our hearts steeped in the quest for fairness: in our schools, in our jobs, in our wages, in our relationships...

When we lived in Tacoma, Washington, a Sociology Professor at Pacific Lutheran University was a member of our congregation. He taught a course on Marriage and Family Life, and every year invited a trio of couples to sit on a panel to field questions from the students.

The year that Carolyn and I were asked to participate, a question arose about how you divide up all the duties that are required to make a household function. One of the couples shared their system: they had assigned a numerical value to each and every task: doing laundry, changing the oil in the car, yard work, paying the bills, everything had a number...So they simply divvied up the tasks until the number was equal, and their workload was fair...

What a shock it is for us to come to this parable – and others like it – and realize that Jesus doesn't really seem to care a fig about fairness... In fact, he's constantly going around life popping every fairness balloon he can find, those to which we so tightly cling.

Says the author, David Gemmell, *Do not complain of life's unfairness. It is never fair - at best (life) is impartial.*

Here's a question: **Was the owner of the vineyard justified in his decision to pay all the workers the same wage – regardless of how many hours they'd worked?**

Agree (raise hand)/disagree (hold nose)

The money was fair, right? The first workers got exactly what they agreed to at the beginning of the day.

So if the wages were equal, what part of the bargain was not fair?

The labor was inequitable...

This *fairness* theme is also part of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. You remember the story:

A man has two sons. The older boy is a chip off the old block. He does his work, doesn't complain, puts his nose to the grindstone and stays at it til the job is done.

His younger brother, though, is the opposite. He hates working the farm, he turns up his nose at the grindstone... and he finally demands that his father give him his share of the inheritance. He wants to get off the farm and into the city where life promises to be exciting, enticing, entertaining and inviting. Well, the old man gives him the money... So off he goes to squander it all on ***loose living***, or, as it has also been referred to: ***wine, women and song***.

Soon the young man wakes up to find his head hurting, his money gone, and the only song he can sing now is a sad version of *Poor, Poor, Pitiful Me!*

Finally, he comes to his senses and heads home, practicing his confession speech on the way, hoping that his dad will at the very least allow him to come back to work and live on the farm.

Well, before he can even step on the old homestead, his father runs out to greet him, welcoming him home before the boy can even give his speech a decent start. He sends one servant to bring the young man the best robe they have, and another to kill the fatted calf because they are gonna have a party to welcome the boy home.

Those of you who know the story remember that it's not over.



The older brother gets wind of his selfish sibling's return...and his father's unbelievable behavior. What was his complaint?

***IT'S NOT FAIR!!***

Was he right? YES! It was not fair – to the older brother who never once stepped out of line...nor was it fair to the crew who put in a full twelve hour work day and got paid the same as those who barely got their hands dirty!!

And you know what can happen when discontent takes hold, when unfairness has been accused, when displeasure drives one to seek revenge...

As the old saying goes, *All's fair in... love and war...*

Though that's a popular principle to banter about, it's never a good principle to follow: either in human relationships OR in armed conflict... It kinda reminds me of that statement popularly attributed to Mahatma Ghandi: *An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.*

And yet, maybe there is some truth in that statement – at least in the ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE part. I mean, **that** seems to fit **God's modus operandi** – the way God works – for God's plan – is not ***fair in love***, it's ***grace***...and grace is manifestly **unfair**.

Did the workers who'd spent all day in the field feel like their wages were fair when compared to all the johnny-come-lately's? No!

Did the older son feel like it was fair to welcome that wasteful excuse for a brother back home with a fancy and expensive part?

Do you suppose any of Jesus' followers raised an eyebrow when the Lord promised the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise!"

No, God's plan is NOT fair...because...God's plan is about ***grace***...



True story. A mother had a number of children, and one of the sons, as can often happen, embraced the role of being the “black sheep” of the family. As an adult he was the sibling most likely to not participate in a family gathering. Then that sense of non-involvement deteriorated even further after that son was married, and finally the family relationship just fell apart for him.

The mother suffered greatly – both at her son’s dis-interest in his former family, and by the rudeness and acrimony shown to her by her daughter-in-law.

The mother spent years praying and hoping for a resolution. Yet, as time went on, things did not get better. In fact, the hurtful words continually spoken to her finally drove the grieving mother to take the only action she could think of. She visited their lawyer and had her son’s name removed from the will...

20 years pass, and the mother’s ongoing pain has settled in her heart like a dull but ever-present ache. Then, one afternoon, out of the blue, there’s a knock on the door. She opens it and finds standing there her black-sheep son. He asks if he can come in, and they embark on a conversation that certainly doesn’t heal the wounds, but it does give the mother hope that things will be different.

**She feels blessed by the experience.** So much so that the very next day she revisits the lawyer and has that son’s name reinstated in the will with his other siblings.

Fast forward three years...and the mother has not heard a word from her son again. No birthday call, no Mother’s Day card, no Christmas letter – nothing, nada, nichts... And that’s not fair, is it?

Yet...it turns out that just like in the parable of the Prodigal Son, as well as in our parable for today, God’s work in our lives is never about fairness... No... it’s always about grace.

Here’s what I mean.

When asked about the silence of her wayward son,  
since that touching moment between the two in her kitchen,  
the mother said, “I don’t care that he hasn’t called.

I never felt right about taking his name out of the will,  
and I’ll never stop loving him as my son.”

***That’s the definition of grace!!***

We all crave fairness. But thanks be to God for the Lord's gift of grace! It's a gift that continually pronounces us forgiven and loved – even when we don't ask for it, don't appreciate it, don't deserve it and don't acknowledge it.

God says, "I don't care if \_\_\_\_\_ (put **your** name in the blank) SCOTT hasn't thanked me for all the gifts I've given him. I'll never take him out of my will, and I'll never stop loving him as my son."

No, in the case of the Almighty's love, our Lord has chosen to be in relationship with us based not at all on fairness, but only and always on the promise that God loves us:

-truly, madly, deeply,

-totally and completely,

-forever and ever. Amen.