

Matthew 20:1-16  
"Not Fair!"  
Pentecost 17 (Proper 20 A)

September 24, 2023  
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.  
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

***"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to Me? Or do you begrudge My generosity?"*** (Matthew 20:15).

Each time I read through the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, I always say to myself, "This is not fair!" You mean, despite the hours worked, everyone was given the same wage! This is not fair! We expect that the longer we work, the more pay we receive. We expect those who work fewer hours to be *surely* paid less.

This is a terrifying thought. God does what He wants with what belongs to Him!

As hard as it is for our old sinful nature to accept, our work really counts for nothing. This is the point of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

Jesus said, ***"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. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard"*** (Matthew 20:1-2).

This Master is pictured as a person of considerable importance and enormous wealth. So, there is no need for Him to do any of the vineyard work personally as He hires laborers who would be delighted for any work. So, He goes out to the marketplace to find laborers first thing in the morning. These laborers, who needed an income, were excited to know that they were guaranteed a denarius. So, off they went to the vineyard.

As time went on, the Master comes to realize that He needs more workers in His vineyard so that the work would be accomplished. So, He hires more workers at the third hour – 9 a.m., the sixth hour – noon, the ninth hour – 3 p.m., and the 11<sup>th</sup> hour – 5 p.m.

Up until the end of the workday, every laborer is happy, since they have all been given something to do, and they knew they would receive a wage worthy of their work.

We, too, know what it is like to work for the Lord all day. For many of us, we have been Christians since infant Baptism. Many of us have been Sunday School teachers or served on various church boards. You may be a faithful giver. You may be one who has had regular church attendance all your life.

And, like the early laborers, we don't mind when the Master goes out and hires others later in the day. We delight knowing that more hands make light work. I'm sure the early laborers were happy knowing that they didn't have to work as hard with more laborers in the vineyard. Like them, we delight, looking around the pews as we see fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who have joined Prince of Peace Lutheran Church through adult instruction, or at the invitation of friends, or by coming as our guest one Sunday morning or Monday evening being filled with the Gospel of Christ. We even give thanks to God for those occasional deathbed conversions that we have heard about.

But then what does the Master of the vineyard do? ***“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.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house”*** (Matthew 20:8-11).

With possibly the exception of the first laborers, the Master has exceeded all expectations. He is very generous with His payroll as He pays everyone the same wage – *a full day's pay* – no matter how long or how hard they worked.

You likely sympathize with those first called laborers. I sure do. They worked from dawn until dusk. They worked through the heat of the day. They are drenched in sweat. Their muscles are sore. And they are getting paid the same wage as those who worked only a fraction of the day? Worse yet, those who worked barely an hour are getting paid the same wage?! This is not fair!

This Master is giving the last as much as He gave to the first. Yes, we rejoice knowing more hands make light work, but is that really fair? Yes, we want more brothers and sisters in the kingdom of heaven, but should those last-minute converts receive the same reward as me, who has been a follower of Christ all my life? Or what about those who put their left overs in the offering. Is it fair that they get the same reward as me who gives to God a proper tithe? This is not fair!

In the Parable, the only reason that some came last, and others came first is that the Master chose to call them in that order. The last could have been chosen first. What really matters is that they were chosen. In the Parable, we see Jesus calling laborers into His vineyard. He is calling you and me as His laborers in the morning, mid-day, and even as the sun is setting.

You see, God does what He wants with that is His, and He desires to be generous! Jesus and His kingdom are not about what is fair. Instead, His reign is all about the giving what isn't fair: His grace!

Grace is not fair! Grace is getting what we do not deserve. Do you know what we all deserve? Death, hell, and damnation. Ouch pastor! This is true. Our sinful nature would rather agree with those attorney commercials that proclaim, "*You deserve compensation,*" and with the classic McDonald's ad which says, "*You deserve a break today.*" But we don't deserve anything good, since even our best work is soiled with sin.

Since the Fall of Adam, our hearts are not pure, but factories for sin. Like the first laborers, we focus on our sinful pride as we resent others. Our sinful nature leads us to compare one another, to grumble against one another, and to complain about each other. The "*wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23a). This is the proper payment that we all deserve.

But despite our fallen sinful nature, God is generous! I am sure thankful that God's ways are not our ways. I am thankful that God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9). I am so thankful that God is God and we are not. Just imagine how life would be if humanity – *and not God* – were in charge? There would be no grace. There would be no forgiveness. In Christ, God the Father shows His generosity.

Just think about the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). There, God shows His lavish grace shown upon a wayward son who squandered everything – *his money and his possessions* – through reckless living. When this wayward son came to his senses, he came up with a plan of what he would say to his father. But he never had the chance to say the first word to his father. Instead, when his father saw him at a distance, he ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. On top of that, he gave his son the best robe, a ring on his hand, shoes on his feet – *and* a royal banquet.

Or think about the forgiveness Christ offered to those who crucified Him. As He was nailed to the cross, even as those below were casting lots for His garments, and mocking Him, Jesus says, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23:34).

Or what about *the* 11<sup>th</sup> hour conversion. You know, the promise of paradise for the repentant thief? As the repentant thief was hanging on his cross, he came to faith in Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He said to Jesus, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*” (Luke 23:42). And Jesus replied, “*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise*” (Luke 23:43).

Jesus is truly generosity in the flesh! In Christ alone, God does – *here and now* – what He wants with what is His! Christ’s kingdom is a kingdom of grace!

In Holy Baptism, He pours out His generous forgiveness upon sinners as He makes you His own. In His Word, He speaks His abundant forgiveness as we repent and confess our sins and He absolves those sins. In the Lord’s Supper, He feeds us generously His very Body and His very Blood as He forgives our sins and strengthens our weak faith.

Just as the owner of the vineyard absorbed the costs of paying all workers the same wage, our Lord Jesus has absorbed the full cost of our sins, including our sins of comparing, grumbling, and complaining. In His death on the cross, our Lord Jesus made Himself last in order to make us, by His grace, first in His kingdom. We then live by faith and mercy as grateful workers in His vineyard. We live by faith in the Lord’s grace. We all receive the same favor and the same forgiveness.

Yes, each laborer received the same wage. It goes against everything we hold dear, against all our notions of what is right and fair. It goes against our sinful nature on fairness. And praise God for that! Praise be to God that He doesn’t operate according to our standards of what is right and fair. Instead, He does what He wants with what is His! Thanks be to God that He gives us what we do not deserve. Instead, He gives us His grace. He gives us His undeserved favor, love, and mercy because of His suffering, death, and resurrection. He gives us His blood-bought, cross-won forgiveness, life, and salvation. In Christ alone, we are truly given what is not fair: God’s amazing grace! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen. + **SOLI DEO GLORIA** +