

Grace Is Not Fair

King of Glory Lutheran Church  
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry  
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Year A: Pentecost 16: Matthew 20:1-16

1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?' 7 They said to him, "Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard.' 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, "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.' 13 But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

*What we think is not fair might just be contributing to the demise of God's other children; at least to the demise of our own spirits. We covet God's grace of others when we can be thankful for God's grace to all, including ourselves.*

They were the last to be chosen. They had stood in the marketplace all day. They were the workers no one wanted to hire. How humiliating! What shame. All they wanted was to earn enough to provide dinner to their hungry family waiting anxiously at home. They were no different than those hired before sunrise. All of them were day laborers. None of them had land like the tenant farmers on wealthy

landowners properties. All of them simply needed food for today. They all would gather again before sunrise tomorrow. It wasn't fair, but at least there would be food for today.

It wasn't fair.

Remember saying that as a kid? Yes? "It's not fair that Billy wants to play with Joey instead of me." "It's not fair my sister gets to stay up later than me."

Elementary school teachers hear this one often. "It isn't fair that she gets to stand ahead of me in the line." In reality every second-grader is headed to the same place...the lunch room. Yet somehow even at that young age, pride and ego rises to the surface. The work of sin amongst us: not wanting to stand in solidarity, but instead jockeying for the highest place of recognition, stepping on the others below.

So it was at the end of the day, when all the workers come to the landowner for their daily wage. The landowner wants to make certain all the workers see what he is about to do. He says to the manager, "Pay those hired last – pay them first."

The last chosen from the marketplace to work one hour were paid first. They received a full days wage! Those hired before sunrise saw it right before their eyes. Quickly they became resentful and angry. "That's not fair! We were out here all day long in the heat!"

Instead of being grateful that more workers were hired, they grew offended. Rather than being thankful for their own day's work, they were insulted and angry.

The landowner quickly reminds them he can do as he wishes with his money. If he chooses that all receive equal pay, that is his choice, it's not their choice. No matter how they feel, he is the employer. He gives freely to all, not making distinctions. God gives freely to all, not making distinctions.

When we claim something isn't fair, what we're really saying is that it is not fair from our point of view. Our ego-centric framework of the world rises up when something doesn't meet our needs, our wants, or our desires. It's not fair for me.

At its most mature, that fabulous sense of fairness becomes the basis of justice and advocacy. Then we work for the solidarity of all rather than the perks for those at the top.

It's not fair that day laborers are still hired in Loveland and Ft. Collins to move our belongings when perhaps they cannot rise to a level of being home owners themselves. It's not fair that black and brown people don't get interviews as often as white people. It's not fair that KidsPak has to deliver hundreds of bags of food each weekend just to keep children fed. The world works that way and it's not fair.

But volunteers for KidsPak don't sit back and get insulted by a food and economic system that honors some and works against others. They deliver bags of food! When our sense of fairness works on behalf of others then we are co-workers in building God's kingdom. When our sinful self and sense of misplaced righteousness rises up, that's when we get in trouble.

Jesus told this allegory in response to the disciples. Peter has just asked, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Even though there wasn't a sense of individual identity in ancient times, we can still hear the honor shame culture coming through. "Will you recognize us? Is there honor to come?"

Jesus answers, "Yes you'll sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. AND, *everyone* who has left houses or brothers or sisters or children or fields for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold. But many who are first will be last and the last first." (Matthew 19:27-30)

Warning! Warning! Lest you think disciples, that you are close to me....God the landowner hands out grace and mercy to all of God's children. Not just the chosen ones. God's grace is for all. It is not fair. It is gift.

God's grace for all. The newborn baby whose giggle delights the world. God's grace. The neighbor down the street who has to show off his new riding lawnmower. God's grace. The ex-husband who drives me crazy. God's grace. The employer who clearly shows favor to some employees and not others. Grace. The refugees working tirelessly in Greeley's meat packing plant so we have steak to eat. God's grace. The black and brown people protesting in the streets for justice. God's grace. The police men and women working faithfully and the ones who target minorities. God's grace. Our nations politicians on both sides of the aisle with whom we get angry. God's grace. War lords in third-world countries who terrify villagers, kidnap children and murder innocent men and women. God's grace. God's grace?

But that's not f...

It's not fair. Grace is a gift. Grace is a gift from God. If we resent it, then we have not yet learned it.

How do we learn of God's grace?

This story tells us we have a choice: resentment and anger or gratitude. In it for me, or in it for the sake of the world.

Will we be like that self-righteous second-grader always wanting to be first in line? Or will we seek to be in solidarity with the poor and the suffering? Will we rejoice in God's grace for all or will we resent God's grace and love for all? We get to choose. This choice has nothing to do with fairness. It has to do with spiritual transformation and being more like Jesus.

Take two 3x5 cards. On one write the name of a person whom it offends you that God has grace for. Be honest. On the other card, write down something you are incredibly grateful for.

Notice they are both the same weight in your hands. You can hardly feel them. Yet one is weighing your spirit down with invisible chains of anger or bitterness.

Now you can only keep one. You get to choose. Which card will it be?

Grace is not fair. It is gift! Amen.

\*Rev. Dr. David Lose commentary on Working Preacher from 2011 contributed to the content of this sermon.

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