

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

God Is Not Fair

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Matthew 20:1-16

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Grace is unfair. At least, by what we value and how we value each other, God's love is not fair. And it is a good thing because were it fair we would be much the poorer.

A while back my sister and brother-in-law played the God of love with their children. Tyler, the youngest had, at the end of the school year, lost his backpack. It was not then unusual for Tyler to lose things for he was in the second grade. Cory, who was entering fifth grade, hadn't lost his backpack and it was still in usable condition. So when it came time to buy school supplies Tyler got a new backpack and Cory didn't. And as children will do, Cory began to state that it wasn't fair.

And Cory is right, isn't he? It isn't fair for the child who lost his backpack to get a brand new one and the responsible child, the child who kept track of and took care of his backpack, to be stuck with the same old thing. Tyler was rewarded for his carelessness and Cory was, in his mind, being punished for his maturity.

Early on in our lives we develop a keen sense of fairness. One of a child's strongest senses and most heartfelt statements of being wronged is "It is not fair!" Oh, we as parents can respond with the standard, "Who said life was fair?" but that is just a way of dodging the issue when we know our children are right. Or are they?

The Jewish audience who would have first heard today's parable of the workers in the vineyard would have yelled loudly "not fair" on at least three levels.

First, there is the obvious economic injustice of this landowner. Some of the workers got up before dawn and went to the market place at first light looking for work. These folks worked from sun up, through the heat of the day to sun down, all twelve hours of daylight. Some of the workers worked nine hours, some 6 hours and some only one hour, the 11th hour of the day. It is true that the early and industrious workers agreed to a denarius for the day, a fair wage. But the late 11th hour workers also got a full days wage even though they only worked an hour in the evening cool. It is not fair.

The Jewish audience would also have heard this on a political level. It is the Jews who were the early risers politically. It is they who suffered and died to put together the institutions that make society and culture run. The people of Israel fought foreign invader after foreign invader, just as they do today, to have their land and their rights. And now those lately come to the holy land, the Gentiles, Romans, Babylonians, Egyptians and Samaritans, want in on the benefits of Jewish martyrs. It is not fair for they have not earned

their rights.

And there is an implied religious injustice here as well. God first came to Abraham and Sarah. It was Abraham and Sarah who by the instruction of God and at an advanced age packed up their whole family and a few of their possessions and left great wealth, family and friends behind to wander for years in a strange land. It is generations of the children of Israel who kept faithfulness and worship alive to the one God. It is they who suffered repeated holocausts, from slavery in Egypt to murder and exile in Babylon, for this one God, the true owner of all vineyards. And now Jesus, in this parable, says that the last hour believer, the foreigners and Gentiles, receive the same grace, the same love and the same full salvation as those of the first hour. How can this be? It is not fair.

I was struck by how the logic of grace is so offensive to our own sense of fairness while in seminary. Dr. Tannehill, the professor of a class on the Function of Language in Biblical Studies (Sounds like a hoot of a class doesn't it? It was!) had us break up into teams of four and five folks to present a variety of parables to the rest of the class.

On the day one team made their presentation four of the members were punctual. The fifth member came late. Four of the members were well prepared. They used textual, historical, redactional and narrative criticism to analyze and explain the text. The fifth member made no real contribution. In frustration the four turned to Professor Tannehill and pleaded that they not be graded by the work of the fifth member, but by their own full effort.

Dr. Tannehill firmly told them that they were assigned the project as a team and they would be graded as a team; that each member would receive the same grade, even the fifth member, the 11th hour scholar. The class joined in the protest calling out "But that's not fair." The presenting team then read this parable of the vineyard and we knew we had been had. Or as the young child in the "Mountain Dew" cartoon commercial says it, "We've been hosed Davey, we've been hosed."

I was in a congregation that was installing a new sound system. I gave the organizer of the work, Bill Calvert, a United Methodist coffee mug for all the work he had done on the sound system. I wanted to thank and honor him. Though they didn't do as much work, a couple of others were there with Bill for much of the week. About half way through the installation Bill got hurt. Another man left a weekend workshop on Methodist theology early and continued to organize and finish the work. And there was a high school youth who came by after school to help and understands the system second only to Bill. And of course someone else rounded up an emergency crew to work on Saturday morning and showed up early to repair the floor where

it had been torn up to run cable so the rug guy could do his work and get the system ready for Sunday. And the rug guy did the work for free.

All these folks and several others, some 11th hour, made it possible for the church to have a sound system for worship. But only Bill got a mug. What would God, in God's grace have done?

In some churches, certainly not ours, there is a membership hierarchy where the members who have been around longer have more privileges and rights, more power and say than new members or new attendees. And old Christians, those that have been Christian for decades, I won't name names, have more to say than the newest confirmands, or the youngest children. It only seems fair that long term membership and commitment should have its privileges, especially before the Johnny and Jenny come lately. But apparently, by the parable Jesus tells us today, grace doesn't work this way.

Now I will really push the envelope with you concerning God's fairness. What happens to truly wicked people. In my mind there are several folks who deserve to be on the top ten list of "The World's Most Wicked Persons." We vilify men like Sadaam Hussein or Osama Ben Ladin, or whoever our current villain is. These have done some significant damage, but Hitler came darn close to total destruction of western democratic society. Hitler's name is one of the top on my wicked list. Hitler worked out his twisted sickness on a whole world. Those who followed him joined in a pact with the devil and those who resisted him were slaughtered. He started a world war in which hundreds of thousands, warrior and innocent, died. And woe to you if you were one of six million Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, mentally ill or physical impaired for you were branded the "problem." And the solution was to gas and burn you. Hitler makes me want to believe in hell because he deserves it.

Now suppose, as an exercise in understanding how radical is God's grace, that at the last moment of his life, locked away in his bunker while Berlin is being destroyed, Hitler prays and in that last second just before his suicide Adolph Hitler says to God, "Here I am, Lord. Please forgive me. I give myself to you." What if Hitler were a very 11th hour worker in the vineyard?

We might protest to God, "It is not fair that this mass murderer, who came to your vineyard at the very last minute and hardly picked a grape while killing millions, should have the fullness of your love." Would God answer us with, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last will be first, and the first last."

What is hard for us, with our sense of fairness, is that for God it makes no difference who comes to work first and who comes last. Every worker, every believer, the ones who came here in 1992 and the one who is here for the first time today, all get the same gift. Jesus dies for every one of us equally. Mercy is for every one of us equally. The salvation that will heal our weary souls by the extravagant and unconditional generosity of our Creator, by the universal redemption and forgiveness of our Christ, and by the continual guidance and purpose of the Holy Spirit, is the same for old and young, wise and foolish, early and late. Grace is full and free to all.

Beloved, it matters not when we hear and respond to the call of God in the marketplace of our lives. God's fairness is more generous and broader than we can understand or imagine. God is the forever loving Lord and master of our lives. That we trust such a love for whatever part of any day is enough. First or last, salvation, God's healing of our fears and wounds, is fully and completely ours.

Shalom and Amen.