

Preacher: Pastor Twyla
Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

"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 a denarius for the day, 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 a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 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 a denarius? 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."

When you heard this parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, was there anything about it that bothered you. I suspect that many of us would have at least a fleeting feeling that there's something unfair about the compensation the vineyard owner gave to those who worked for him; particularly because some worked many more hours than others. It just doesn't seem fair that those who worked for only one or just a few hours would get the same pay as those who worked all day.

"It's just not fair!" This is a phrase that we hear children say sometimes when they don't get what they want. "It's not fair! You don't love me anymore!" It seems that we are born with, or we learn quickly this sense of fairness.

That really is not a bad thing. As we get older, this sense of fairness grows too and becomes a foundation for our understanding of justice and equality. Having said that, this may not always be the case. Even as adults, we have a tendency to be self-centered, thinking first about whether we are being treated fairly. Motivated by our own wants, needs, hopes and expectations, we may think more about whether we are being treated fairly, more than whether others are being treated fairly.

We hear in today's parable that a landowner went out early in the morning to hire laborers. This was a common practice in Jesus' day. Men who did not have a daily place of employment would go out to the marketplace and hope that someone would hire them for a job, even a short-term job that would help them to provide food for their families.

In this particular case, a landowner had a vineyard. He was desperate to find people to help harvest the grapes. There was only a certain window of time to accomplish this, because if the grapes did not get harvested when they were ripe, the landowner risked losing his grape crop to rains that would arrive and the grapes would rot.

So, the landowner needed workers and there were men in the marketplace needing a job. Early in the morning the landowner went out and hired men to work for him, making an agreement with this group of men to pay them a denarius for their days work. I read in one of my

resources that this could supply food for about three days for a family. These guys hit the jackpot getting this job.

But the landowner must have realized later in the day that he was going to need more workers to get the job done before the rain arrived. So, he went out into the marketplace to find more workers. The revised standard translation of this text says that he, "saw others standing idle in the marketplace." Immediately, the word "idle" conjures up in our thoughts that these men were lazy. But, the Greek word used here, when interpreted correctly means that they were waiting. They were not loafing. They wanted a job, but no one offered them a job.

The landowner did this several times throughout the day, up until about one hour before quitting time. Notice, however, that he never said to these whom he employed later in the day exactly what he would pay them. He only said that he would pay them a fair wage.

As you heard, at the end of the day, the landowner instructed his manager to pay those that were employed for the day, beginning with those that were hired last. So, that's what happened. We learn that all of those who were hired later in the day, including those who only worked for an hour, were paid a denarius, the same amount that those who were hired early in the morning and worked all day in the scorching sun had been promised. When the all-day workers saw this they totally expected to get more than a denarius. That would only be fair, right? But that's not what happened; so, they complained to the landowner. Who wouldn't?

The landowner responds, saying that he did them no wrong. He gave them what he promised them. He also said that as the landowner, he has the right to choose what he will pay the others, using his wealth as he so chooses, in this case to be generous, in helping others. He asks them, "Are you envious because I am generous?" Jesus concludes the parable saying, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

This parable opens with Jesus saying: "for the kingdom of heaven is like," The telling of this parable is to further clarify the membership rules of the kingdom of heaven, beginning with God, and God alone makes the decision who enters the kingdom. The landowner in the parable is God; and believers are the workers.

The parable speaks particularly to those who think that they are superior to others; perhaps because they've been Christians longer, and because they know more of the teachings of the bible and because they have served God longer, and maybe in the most challenging of ministries. Jesus tells us through this parable that we cannot earn our way into God's kingdom; nor should we then mistreat or misjudge those who we think are not worthy of kingdom membership.

It is not unheard of that long-time Christians look down on those who have not been around very long, assuming then that they have little to contribute to the direction and life of the body of Christ because it is assumed they are not established or understanding, in one's own opinion, of the teachings of Christ.

The scripture teaches us that only God can see in the hearts of those seeking membership to the kingdom. God sees their value and potential contributions, and calls them to join in His service. And, whether one has had a long-time commitment or made a recent commitment to Jesus, is of little importance to God. All are highly valued of God's favor, and all are welcome into God's kingdom.

The scripture makes it very clear that our God is a generous God. God wants everyone to be a part of his kingdom, and will extend an offer to be a part of His kingdom no matter where they are in life and no matter what they may have done with their lives. God is generous with his grace. This parable offers reassurance to new believers that God's grace is also given to them.

We may not always feel that is fair, particularly if we are feeling we've earned God's favor and others may not have done so...at least in one's personal opinion. Some Christian's

behavior, their lack of openness to those who may be deemed less established in their faith, is in essence a protest against God in His dealing out what is fair and just. It's a demand for fairness, and justice!

But the question we need to ask ourselves then, after careful self-examination is, "do we really want justice?" Think about it. If we are honest with ourselves, we also have not always been perfect in the past and we are not always perfect Christians now. There are days when we are more focused on and committed to our faith and living out our faith. We all fall short of the 24/7, 365 days a year work ethic of our faith. We all find ourselves at times in our lives, lost and waiting in the marketplace for a sense of direction and reconnection with God. We will miss opportunities when we could have done God's work or even just spent time with God. If we are honest we might need to admit that we punch a timeclock, perhaps in early in the morning, but then actually, punch out later in the day, not putting in the time with God. Do we really want justice? God's justice?

R.C. Sproul, an America Reformed Theologian and ordained Pastor in the Presbyterian Church, taught a class on the Bible back in the sixties in a New England College. He had 250 freshman sign up for his Old Testament class. The only room at the college big enough to hold that many students was the chapel. One of the first things he did was go over the syllabus with his students. He told them there were three short five-page papers due by specific deadlines throughout the semester. He told them, "The first one is due on September 30th when you come to class. The second is due October 30th and the third is due on November 30th. You must get the papers in on time, because unless there's a death in your family or you are in the school infirmary, you will get an 'F' grade on that assignment. Does everyone understand?" Everyone answered yes.

September 30th came and out of 250 students, 25 students came in with all kinds of excuses for why they did not have their papers completed, and asked for more time to complete their papers. They came to him trembling and whining and said things like they were having trouble adjusting to college life and they did not budget their time correctly. Please don't flunk us. Could he please give them a little more time to complete their papers? And he did. He gave them 3 more days, but he said, don't let this happen again.

In October, 200 students handed in completed papers and 50 students didn't turn in a paper. He asked what happened that these students did not turn in their papers. They said, "you know how it professor, it's midterms and we had lots of other work to complete for other classes, and it was homecoming." After reminding them what he said the last time, that they should not think of being late the next time; he told them he would give them one more chance and that if they did not have their papers handed into him in three days, they would get an "F" on that assignment. Prof. Sproul said that the class broke out in song, singing, "We love you Prof Sproul, oh yes we do, we love you prod Sproul," He said he felt like the most popular professor on campus, and he rode that wave until November.

It came time to hand in the November paper. This time 100 came with their papers and 150 did not. The students came in cool and come. He asked one student who was a marine veteran, "Johnson, where is your paper?" and the student said, "Hey, Hey, don't worry about it Prof, I'll have it for you in a couple days." He picked up a pen and the most dreaded black book and opened it and he said, "Johnson, you don't have your paper, F." And he called out a few other students' names who did not turn in their papers too and did the same thing. Sproul says that then out of the midst of the class one voice shouted to him, "That's not fair!"

He called out to the student, "Fitzgerald, was that you?" The student said, "yes." Sproul said, "So, it's justice you want?" The student said, "yes." Sproul asked, "Fitzgerald, didn't you miss the deadline last month? I'll tell you what I'm going to do. If it's justice you want, it's

justice you will get." And he went back to October 30 and changed Fitzgerald's grade to an "F". There was a gasp in the room and Sproul asked, "Are there any others who want justice?" He didn't get any takers.

Sproul then explained grace to his students. He said, after the first missed assignment, the students were amazed by his grace. After the second missed assignment, they assumed his grace. By the third assignment, they demanded his grace. They believed it was an entitlement to them and they deserved it. He said they were confused about the meanings of fairness and grace. "Grace, by its very definition is not something that is deserved, it's something you cannot possibly deserve." He says, "you have no merit before God. You only have demerits. And if God should ever, ever treat you justly outside of Christ, you will perish."

When I heard that, I just thought, "Wow." If you want to hear the story told by him, you can go to Youtube.com and search, "R C Sproul a quick story about Grace," and listen. We should ask ourselves, "Do we want fairness, or grace? And are we willing to extend grace to others as God does to us?"

The parable points out that we all have choices to make, and we cannot avoid them. Are we going to be envious and focus on what we think is unfair, and allow that feeling to live out through our actions and words. Or are we going to be grateful for the blessings, are we going to be grateful for God's generosity, which includes grace for our own failures, and allow that gratitude to guide our words and actions? Are we willing to truly put aside our selfishness to express our gratitude for God's grace for ourselves, AND for those, who like us, need God's grace, even though we don't deserve it? It's our choice, and you cannot be grateful and envious at the same time. Demanding fairness and being envious when we feel we are being treated unfairly by God, weighs us down and separates us from God.

I invite you to take out the two small notecards you received this morning. (This is an exercise that I found on "Working Preacher.") On one of these cards, I want you to write one resentment, some grudge that you hold in your heart, something you believe you lack, or something of which you are envious. Be honest, honesty matters. Then on the other card, write some blessing, some areas of abundance, something for which you are grateful, in your own life, or, just as importantly, in the life of someone else.

Once you are done, hold each of these cards face-down in the palm of each hand. Notice that, physically, the two cards weigh the same. Yet spiritually, existentially, one of those cards is weighing you down, like chains secured to an anchor wrapped tightly around their hearts, while the other is light as a feather.

We're going to pass baskets now to collect one of your cards. You must choose which card you are going to put in the basket. Take the other card home with you as a reminder of your choice of what you want to keep. You might put this card somewhere you will see it to remind you of your choice, and be encouraged to be true to your choice. May it remind us that there was only one who is perfect, and he gave his life for us, so that we might see and know God's gift of grace, grace that we don't deserve, grace given not because we earned it but because we have a generous God who loves us more than we can possibly imagine. Amen.