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Matthew 20:1-16

Praise God it is not fair

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. **2**He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. **3**"About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. **4**He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' **5**So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. **6**About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' **7**" 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' **8**"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' **9**"The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. **10**So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. **11**When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. **12**'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' **13**"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' **14**Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. **15**Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' **16**"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

What's this? They all got the same? Do you mean to tell me that what I do doesn't matter? Do you mean to tell me that all my hard-earned religious cash isn't worth anything? Do you mean to tell me that all those efforts all add up to nothing? How can that be fair? It isn't fair. Praise God for that!

In today's reading, Jesus tells us a shocking parable about a man who hires workers to work his vineyard. As the day advances, the owner realizes he needs additional workers and thus hires more. Six times, he hires laborers for his vineyard.

None of this is shocking. Jesus says the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. Anyone who has ever had a deadline knows that you do what you need to do in order to get the job done. The hiring is not the problem; the payment is the problem. At the end of the day, they all received the same wage.

I confess that I really do not like this parable. You cannot run a business this way. It goes against everything we have been taught. The hardest worker is supposed to get the biggest reward. Early to bed, early to rise, makes a person healthy, wealthy, and wise. The early bird gets the worm. It is not fair to pay the person who worked one hour the same wage as the person who worked the entire day.

Of course, one can argue that the owner is justified in doing this. In verse 2, it says he “agreed” to their wage (this is the same Greek root for the word justified). There was a meeting of the minds. The owner is just in paying the wage. The workers understood this. However, just because it is just does not make it fair.

Does God have to be fair? God is just, but he does not have to be fair? Listen to verse 15, “Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own...” In other words, isn't God free to do as he pleases? Remember, God is the one who in the burning bush said his name was “Yahweh.” This means God is able to do as he pleases.

That is a scary thought. Most of us like God out of the picture. God, you hang out in heaven. God be a general idea. God start up the clock and let it wind. Be free in heaven. Just do not come too close. Do not butt into our lives because when you do, everything turns upside down. It is scary to think that God is free.

It is even scarier to think of what God does with his freedom. Many think God spends his time as a bookkeeper recording all of our sins. Others think God spends his time like Santa giving out good presents to good people and bad presents to bad people. Others think God spends his time playing jokes on people.

There is a true story about a pastor who had a cat that was stuck in a tree. The branch could not hold the pastor's weight so he tied a rope around the branch and tied the other end to the back of the truck. He slowly moved his truck away from the branch in order to lower the branch to the ground. When the branch was low enough, he stopped the truck. As he did, the rope unraveled and the cat was sent flying through the air.

The next day, he ran into a member of the church who was buying cat food. Because the woman hated cats, the pastor asked her why she was doing this. She said, “Pastor, you will never believe this but yesterday my daughter was begging for a cat. I told her to go outside and ask God to give you a cat.” Well, as she was praying, a cat flew out of the air and landed in our backyard. The pastor said, “You know, I do believe you!”

Is this what does God with his freedom? Does God play jokes on us? No! In verse 15, Jesus says, “Or are you envious because I am generous?”. Literally, the Greek says, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” You see, God uses his freedom to be generous. God uses his freedom to break into our lives in order to give the kingdom to those who cannot earn it. That is what God does with his freedom.

But isn't that then the real issue for us? God seems to reward those who do little? Why doesn't God hate the people we hate? Pastor Stephen Brown says, “There are no problems in a church that a few funerals couldn't fix.” That is how we want God to act. But God doesn't act this way. Instead, he loves even those who do not pull their weight.

This is unfair. However, this is the way it needs to be. Lets flip this over for a moment. What chance do we have, if God is not generous? What chance do we have if all the laborers do not get the same wage? Where would we be if we got what we deserved?

Most of us read the parable from the vantage point of the laborer who has worked all day. What if we are more like the one who is hired towards the end? When I think of those who labored all day, I think of Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Deborah, David, Paul, Peter, Lydia, and Luther. These labored their entire lives. They did not go on vacation. They deserve the greatest pay. However, God does not give them a higher heaven. God does not seat them closer to his throne. God does not give them a larger mansion in the sky. God gives them the same paradise the thief on the cross receives.

Even more, doesn't this parable mean that even here and now God has the right to butt in and give his word of forgiveness to you? In the waters of Holy Baptism, your child receives the same Jesus that a pastor's child receives? In the Lord's Supper, God gives to you the same Jesus that the President of the United States receives? What glorious news. Instead of cursing God, we can praise God for being unfair.

But what about our good deeds? What about the work that we do? Well, it is important. Your neighbor needs your work. The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. But listen again. They all got the same. Praise God that is not fair!

**In Jesus Name,
Amen**