

Sermon (9/24/17, Matthew 20: 1-16):

‘It’s just not fair, I tell you! She has more than I do. I always knew she was your favorite!’

Looking back, moments like that make me cringe. Oh, what I put my parents through. Constantly measuring and assessing to make sure I was getting my fair share. Constantly accusing and complaining when it seemed like the balance tipped in favor of one of my siblings.

There were four of us siblings in my family. Three boys and one girl. We never had much which meant we were always on the look out to make sure that what we did get was being spread out fairly. Share and share *alike* as they say. (Emphasis was always on the *alike*.)

I had a great Uncle whom we visited on rare occasion. Each time we did, before we left he would take us up to his study and hand each of us a coin. He was a banker and, as part of that, he collected coins. The coins he gave us were from his collection. He never had kids of his own, however, so he gave this gift completely unaware of the intense scrutiny of fairness it would come under. As such, the coins he gave us were all different – one large another small, one worth a dollar and the other 50 cents, some sparkling and shiny while others were dirty, tarnished, and old looking. We were trained well enough to hide our disappointment from our Uncle but, later, our parents got an earful.

It’s all so embarrassing to think about in retrospect. I wish I could take it all back. But I was a kid then and, like all kids, we sometimes do stupid things. Thank God for parents who love us through such ugly stages of nonsense. Thank God, we grow out of such pettiness or, I wonder, do we?

One day, a landowner went out early in the morning to hire a bunch of laborers to harvest grapes from his vineyard. He went to the place where the town’s day laborers gathered, hoping to find work. The landowner got out of his truck and negotiated a deal with the laborers. After a fair amount of back and forth, the landowner and laborers settled on a wage. Nothing out of the ordinary but a fair wage for a day’s worth of work. The laborers were content. They and their families would eat that night. They piled into the landowner’s truck and off they went to the

vineyard.

For some reason, a few hours later, the landowner made another run into town to get more laborers. It's hard to say why they weren't hired in the first place – maybe they had a sick child to tend to that morning so they were late or maybe they too had been standing there since 6 in the morning but the landowner just didn't pick them the first time around. This time there was no negotiation over the wage. The workers seemed content with the landowner's promise that he would pay them what was right.

The landowner makes three more trips like this! Crazy, right? We aren't told why. Maybe the landowner underestimated how many people he needed to collect the grapes before they rotted. Maybe this landowner just wasn't very good at this whole farming thing. (He wouldn't be the first farmer in Jesus' parables to show such ignorance!)

The last of the groups to be hired began their work at 5 pm which meant they probably worked only an hour or two before sunset. When the landowner had picked up this group from the town square, I'm guessing they were a very despondent group. Maybe they were left behind because the landowners in the area felt they wouldn't be as productive as the others because they were too old or had a physical disability of some sort. This group had probably resigned themselves to the fact they would again have to tell their families there would be no food for dinner. They would again have to suffer the profound despair of feeling inferior, a lousy provider for those whom they loved.

'Why are you still standing here?' This landowner inquired.

Their answer was poignant and heartbreaking, 'Because no one would hire us...no one wanted us.'

Can you imagine how they felt when this landowner offered them a job at this late hour? Okay, so maybe they would only get a few bucks out of it but at least it was something!

For these folks, the landowner didn't offer them anything for their labor. A far cry from the careful negotiations that took place with the first hires. The laborers were just so grateful for the work, they quickly jumped at the chance even without any promise of a wage.

As the day came to a close, the laborers lined up for their pay. The landowner sat at a table in front - his money box at the ready. The landowner instructed them to line up according to their hire time with the last hires being first. These instructions struck the laborers as odd but, as long they got paid, so be it. Things only became stranger. Turned out the last hires were paid the same amount the first hires had carefully negotiated with the landowner. The same was true for each laborer who followed. By the time it was the first-hires turn, they figured they would get more since they had worked longer. It was only fair, right? By the time they made it to the table, they had already spent this extra money in their minds...a few special treats for dinner that night, maybe even an outing to get ice cream. It's not a stretch for us to imagine their disappointment when they received the same amount everyone else got.

'It's not fair, I tell you!' Is the reaction we can't help but to share with them. 'How come the others received the same amount for working less? How come their coin was just as big and shiny as the first hires?' It feels like an assault on all that is right and fair.

The landowner was bewildered. He wondered why they were so upset. Yes, the salary was nothing special. He'd be the first to admit it but it's what they agreed to earlier in the day.

'Are you angry,' the landowner asked, 'because this is what I chose to do with my money? Are you angry because, while it's not a lot, I wanted everyone to go home with enough tonight-enough to feed their families, enough to feel like they have worth, enough to live for another day?'

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When doing a quick review of church history in confirmation class and during the Pastor's classes I do, I am struck again by just how easy we tend to have it when compared to the sacrifices and struggles of those who tilled the ground of the early church. For them, they gave up everything. To choose Christ meant they suffered a steady stream of abuse, torture, imprisonment, and worse. In comparison, we are the latecomers to the vineyard. We are the late arrivals barely breaking a sweat for the sake of Christ's church as we enjoy the luxury of being in a place someone else

sacrificed much to build. We are the late arrivals whose offering we place in a plate is so meager and whose time we give is so small and whose sacrifices we make to live the grace we have been given is so unremarkable in comparison.

It's interesting that part of the rage we feel when it comes to this story is because we are so quick to identify with the short changed first hires. But what if we are the ones who were the last to be hired? What if it's us that the vineyard owner is concerned about as he wants to make sure we go home with enough... enough to feed our families; enough proof to convince us that we are as deeply loved and valued as everyone who came before us? What if we are the ones to come late to the vineyard expecting little in return but surprised to find there's way more in our envelope than we ever deserved?

It's called grace. It's called a parent's type of love that somehow puts up with our childish ways such as when our self-centeredness causes us to hoard more than we really need, or when our work places become less and less a place of grace because, we think, it's the inevitable cost of doing business, or when our economic systems are based more on greed than on concern for neighbor, or when we're more concerned about being right than finding ways to compromise and work together so that a greater good could be accomplished, or when we become blind to the gift giver because we're so concerned about the size of our gift in comparison to our neighbor's, or when we think we can't because there's not enough rather than thinking maybe we can because it's surprising what God can do when we're willing to forfeit a lunch containing a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish.

In a well-known passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child...when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.' It is, I think, what the vineyard owner finally hopes - that one day we will put aside our childish ways trading it in for the new economy of God's Kingdom where, whether we're first in line or last, the promise is the same - it was for you that Jesus came into the world, it was for you that Christ died and conquered death. We love because God has first loved us.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious and loving God, you have once again brought us to the edge of the waters that makes all things new. Here there is enough to go around whether we are the first or the last. Here no one is short changed and all receive more than they deserve. Here we are refreshed with the reminder that we count, we are precious in your sight, we are loved more than we could possibly imagine and more than could ever give in return. Oh God, just as this water's abundance touches us the entirety of your creation, may it seep into the deep places of our being. May it convince us of grace's power to change even the most desolate of places into springs of new life.

In the years to come, use each of us to teach Jamison what it means to be a part of your new economy of grace. Use us to be instruments of your abundance for those who do not have much, even little when it comes to the awareness of their own great worth.

Create within us new convictions to be a source of life for those who suffer, struggle, grieve, and feel the consequences of age, poverty, loss, hopelessness, and despair. We especially ask you to be attentive to these prayers we are bold to name in our silence or aloud...

We ask all of this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.