

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - A Proper 20 (2026)

Exodus 16:2-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

[‘The landowner said,] “Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’ In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Because none of you know our youngest son, I feel some liberty to use the tale of his Christmas morning meltdown from some thirty years ago as an illustration in today’s sermon. As Christmas mornings go, this was very ordinary. Julie and I had gotten up before the kids did, and as Julie’s wont, she sorted our two sons’ respective gifts into two different areas of the living room to make it easier for us to manage the chaos that was to ensue. With each having their own ‘pile’ of gifts in a designated area, they could devote all their energies to ‘their’ pile without foraging through the mass collection of gifts that had been residing under and near the Christmas tree for weeks, looking at name tags to see which gift belonged to which person. Cell phones were just becoming available to the public, so what we had was a camcorder I hoisted onto my shoulder to video, for posterity’s sake, the mass unveiling and sheer bedlam as they opened package after package. However, before our youngest starts to attack his pile of loot, we hear this ear-shattering shriek like only a redheaded five-year-old boy can make: IT’S NOT FAIR!!!! HE’S GOT MORE THAN ME!!!! Tears flowed, a semi-permanent scowl took over our little angel’s face, and the holly, jolly Christmas of Burl Ives’ fame was nowhere to be found.

‘It’s not fair!’ the grumbling vineyard workers imply when receiving their agreed-to daily wage at the end of their long, hot shift. “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.” We’ve worked our tails off all day, and these ‘Johnny-come-latelies’ are being treated as if they have put in the same time and effort. It’s not fair!

Did you notice that the laborers who had been there all day aren’t saying that ‘the late arrivals shouldn’t be paid,’ but that the landowner made those who had worked one hour *equal* to them in terms of how compensation was paid by the landowner. The all-day workers felt they should have been paid more than the denarii they received, given the difference in hours worked compared with those who arrived later, not that those who showed up later shouldn’t have been paid at all. If the late arrivals got a denarius, they should have received a few more; they had *earned* their wage and then some, given what the others were paid.

The parable tells us that the workers who were hired first agreed to receive the ‘usual daily wage,’ in this case a denarius. Those who followed were hired for ‘whatever is right,’ and those who were hired at the ‘eleventh hour,’ the last hour of the day, agreed to just go into the vineyard and work with no stated wage or agreement. All were hired, all worked, and all were paid. All walked away at the end of the day with *what they needed*, a daily wage represented by a shiny denarius. And remember, the landowner's generosity didn't mean the workers who worked longer days got paid less, though our sensibilities about fairness are upended by the fact that everyone was paid the same. ‘It’s not fair!’ most of us would argue, and we’d be right. It’s not fair when seen through the lens of the ways in which the world operates. This, my friends, is what we call GRACE. In the ways of how the reign of God works, ‘fairness’ is superseded by grace, a gift we cannot earn and that comes directly from the generosity of the parabolic landowner. *Grace just happens*, and if we’re spiritually aware enough to look for and receive it, it will come to us in greater amounts than we can ask for or imagine.

We live in a world that, at least on the surface, places great value on various attributes of success that are often understood to relate to one’s efforts, such as educational or occupational accomplishments, wealth, prestige, power, and popularity. The world values and rewards merit and success achieved through dedication and hard work. None of these traits or desires are necessarily bad or

shouldn't be sought. However, many in our culture judge their 'value' or 'worth' by these worldly attributes. People wrapped up in seeing themselves and the world around them as winners and losers, achievers and nerds, hard workers versus the lazy, also tend to see the world through the lens of 'fairness' rather than 'grace.' Competition rather than cooperation sets the tone for how one functions. By acting on our beliefs about what is 'fair' and who is most 'deserving,' there arises the rationale for why the first are first, and the last are last. The idea of fairness and getting what we deserve creates the illusion that our expectations of how our culture operates are ordered and consistent. With this worldview, what one 'deserves' takes precedence over what one 'needs.' Today's parable sets this worldly understanding on its head.

By accepting God's grace, we acknowledge our need and dependence on him. We shift our thinking away from ourselves and our false sense of self-reliance to God's desire and willingness to bestow his abundance of blessings upon us. God's grace will always fill the void left by the hardships we experience and the weakness we sometimes feel, with hope and encouragement. It is in our weakness and in seeking God's help that he proves that his grace is sufficient for all that ails us.

One way we ritually acknowledge our need for God's forgiveness, grace, mercy, and provision is by coming together at this holy table for the sacrament of communion. The altar rail becomes the great equalizer of people: we all come as broken but redeemed sinners, as people who have experienced success and failure, joy and disappointment, *and* his abundance of grace and mercy. We come pew by pew, where we all wait our turn to receive the consecrated bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We all come with upraised palms in recognition that we receive this gift of life out of the generosity of God, not because we deserve it, but because he willingly offers it to those who receive it with a humble and grateful heart. We come to the table after praying that God will provide us with our 'daily bread,' a continual reminder of our reliance on God's goodness and mercy, not our own doing.

I think today's parable teaches us a few things:

- God's grace always reigns supreme over man's fairness
- If we're honest with ourselves, we really don't want what we 'deserve'; we'd rather have grace...remember last week's sermon on debt forgiveness?
- Everyone who thinks they're 'first' would do well to rethink their position
- Those who think they're 'last' are in for a huge surprise
- Grace cannot be earned or bought, only received

Dear friends, God's gift of eternal life, given freely for all who have been invited and come to be with others working in the vineyard, is not fair. None of us has *earned* the right to be in the vineyard. None of us deserve to be in the vineyard enjoying the fruits of eternal life. We've responded to the *invitation* of a generous landowner who said he'd give everyone what they needed, and that even the last in the vineyard will receive the same reward for coming. This is grace in action. This is love beyond calculation. This is the God we serve and love. Welcome to the vineyard, friends. The invitation is still open. Let's invite others to join in the joy of the vineyard.