

"Fairness V. Grace"

Matthew 20:1-16

21 September 2008, Proper 20A

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 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?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

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.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 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? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Prayer.

When it comes to fairness

The stock market doesn't immediately

Come to mind.

People whose Christmas bonus

Exceeds our annual income by a factor of ten,

Trading stock on computers worth more than the house we live in

Have the Gaul this past week to stand before the television cameras and pronounce that the market is doing what it is doing because of a lack of confidence

Makes the workingwoman and workingman sick!

They'll have to cut back to owning 9 houses, instead of 13,

Whereas, we'll find ourselves bagging groceries until we're 85.

It doesn't seem fair.

"Fairness V. Grace"

Matthew 20:1-16

21 September 2008, Proper 20A

© The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

When it comes to fairness

The Internal Revenue Service doesn't jump off the page, either.

Watching those checkbook destroying quarterly payments or the incredibly high payroll deductions almost makes grown men and women cry.

It feels like someone shouting at us to just "rub a little dirt in it and take a lap" when we hear of government corruption, waste, and loop-holes for the rich.

Yea, that's really fair: being able to freeze our accounts, audit our records, and even penalize us for their errors.

When it comes to fairness

Death has it's own role to play.

We whistle in the darkness to chase away our personal fear,

Even as we crack jokes about death and taxes – the two things in a person's life that one can count on, and neither of them are fair.

Death is rarely fair:

It seems to come at the wrong time,

Well before their time,

Or after they suffered far too long.

Death seems to come to those who don't deserve it:

Like firemen lugging hose up 80 floors inside doomed towers

Or like death-row inmates squeezing the habeas out of habeas corpus and cheating fate for decades.

Our Gospel for this morning is a parable of apparent unfairness.

A land owner, presumably with extravagant resources,

Is attempting to hire farm hands to harvest the grapes from the vines.

Living on the shore of Seneca Lake for three years

Deep in the heart of wine country

Taught me a little about the process of growing grapes, harvesting grapes, and processing the juice to make world-class, quality wine.

During the period of ripening,

Right about this time of year,

Grapes need to be left on the vine for as long as possible to increase their natural sugar content.

Then, grapes need to be harvested as quickly as possible, less the weather or birds destroy the crop: frost, hail, driving wind or rain, disease, rot all conspire to ruin a season's worth of effort, sometimes in a matter of hours.

Timing is everything.

When does one hire all the farm-hands to harvest?

Every vintner is waiting for as long as possible, choosing from the same labor pool.

On the day of harvest,

"Fairness V. Grace"

Matthew 20:1-16

21 September 2008, Proper 20A

© The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

The landowner went to the unemployment office of his day – the market place
And right at the crack of dawn, hired his first laborers
Agreeing with each for a fair daily wage.
The laborers would be eager to work, knowing that not being chosen meant another
day without food on the table for their family.
The landowner would be choosy, selecting the least number but the most able
people, such that his profits wouldn't be eaten away by hiring too many workers.

But, according to Jesus' tale
The harvest wasn't progressing as efficiently as possible.
A quick calculation reveals to the landowner his growing suspicion:
At this rate of harvest, we aren't going to be done in time, grapes will be left on the
vine, and that just might spell economic ruin.
Time to hire more.
And so he did; first at 9am, then at 12 noon, then 3 in the afternoon. Even by 5
pm, when the shadows were growing long, he still had to return for more laborers.
As the day grew longer, the landowners risk increased, so he was willing to pay
each laborer the same for fewer hours of work to avoid catastrophe.
As the day grew longer, the laborers waiting in the marketplace risk increased, so
they were more and more eager to work to avoid a family catastrophe.
For each, the landowner hired his laborers for a full, fair daily wage.

Evening falls, the harvest is complete, and it is time to pay up.
The landowner is delighted because they made the deadline: pay the last first, he
instructs his paymaster.
Starting with the last hired, every worker was paid the equivalent of one day's
wage. Whether they started at 5pm or 6am, everyone received the same.
Can you blame the grumblers?
They are the ones who endured the hot scorching sun. The weaker ones hired at
the end of the day would have died of exhaustion.
Disbelief.
Utter disbelief would have fueled the strongest, hardest working members of the
labor pool. If just wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair.

Friend, the landowner begins.
I am doing you no wrong; you received what I promised.
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? Or are you envious
because I am generous?'

Ah, here we have it.
This is a parable about generosity;
Not fairness.

No one has been denied. No one has been cheated. No one has been given any more or any less than what was promised.

We are offended by the generosity that is given to others. We are not offended with what we receive, rather, we are offended by others getting more than what we believe they deserve.

But, who are we, Jesus is asking, to be the judge of what is or isn't fair?

We live in an imperfect, unfair world;

A world filled with Wall Street greed, Internal Revenue Service penalties, unjust wars and collateral damage.

Jesus teaches us to forgive and to be generous in our love and support of those most in need.

But deep down inside we feel like saying "why can't they help themselves?" "Why do we have to be the ones bailing them out?" or "if only they had a little discipline they wouldn't have faced foreclosure."

Before you know it, we join the Lonesberry crowd jeering, "if you only kept your legs together we wouldn't have to pay for a program for unwed mothers."

This morning, Jesus tells us to cut the complaining,

Stop the slander,

And to take our place at the end of the line.

Oh, how I love irony. Especially when it's the Gospel.

Fairness is the foil that Jesus wields

To punctuate his point about the grace of our heavenly Father.

So life isn't fair.

I can live with that.

I am a serious enough of a student of economics to know that luck is just as important of a player as is hard work and Adam Smith's invisible hand.

I am a serious enough of a student of medicine to know that one simple mutation out of a single human gene that is 20 to 25 thousand genes long can lead to a rare, catastrophic sporadic brain wasting disease.

It isn't fair that Annie Oakley was such a good shot that she didn't miss shooting the cigarette out of the mouth of Kaiser Wilhelm. Had her aim be a miniscule of a deviation off the mark, there would have never been World War I, Hitler wouldn't have risen to power as the leader of a vanquished foe, and billions of people would be alive today ... one who discovered the cure to Alzheimer's disease, another who cured HIV-AIDS, another whose discovery led to an immunization for breast cancer. Had Annie Oakley only twitched.

Make peace with the fact that life isn't fair, less you become its victim.

Jesus shows us another way: embrace grace!

"Fairness V. Grace"

Matthew 20:1-16

21 September 2008, Proper 20A

© The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

Be the grace that God is pouring into this world of need and want.
Be the grace that repairs and restores hurricane whipped families.
Be the grace that welcomes the stranger who dawns our door.
Be the grace that sows the seed and sows the quilt.
Be the grace that peels the potatoes and cooks the turkey.
Be the grace that stands vigil at the bedside, who calls just to check in, who swings by to see if there is anything I can do for you while I'm out.
Be the grace that says a prayer for someone who doesn't know how to pray or who can't say the words.
Be the grace that shares the Gospel with one who has never been bitten by irony, or by a parable of Jesus.
Be the grace.
Be the grace.

The grace of our abundant heavenly Father
Puts us in the back of the bus and in the back of the line.
"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."
Thankfully, there is room for everyone on the bus.
There is a place for each of us in His heavenly kingdom.
Amen.