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Grace Isn't Fair
Matthew 20:1-16

Focus Statement: Sunday September 24 we shall focus on the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. (Matthew 20:1-16) This extended parable plays with the boundaries of fairness and grace. Grace isn't fair. This Sunday we will play with the ideas of grace and fairness, deserving and undeserving, and hopefully find ourselves in a space of gratitude that God does not play fair. We will also continue singing heart songs, perhaps heart songs about grace.

Grace Isn't Fair

"It isn't fair!" What kid hasn't declared that in a huff - to their parent, to a friend, to a brother or sister. This expectation that life should be fair emerges at a young age. As soon as kids can measure or count - they do.... to make sure it's fair. As a parent, a considerable amount of effort and dialogue goes into trying to figure out what's fair. Tobias and Mattea expect us to pour the juice, cut the cake, solve the dispute - whatever - in a fair way. And we want to give our resources to them in a fair way - when we buy birthday presents or Christmas presents or serve dessert - we want to be fair.

But at the same time, you don't have to be that old before you figure out that - quite often - *Life isn't fair*. No one can be protected forever from that reality. It does seem that some people have it quite easy, and others have a tough row to hoe; some bring home a comfortable income; some barely scrape by. Some students get A's without much effort, others work their tails off, and get C's. Some people have all the latest toys or gadgets, some don't. Some have naturally good looks, or athletic ability, or an easy way with words or an artistic skill - and some don't. Some go on cruises for retirement, some scrimp and save with every paycheck. Some are healthy, some have chronic illness. It's not fair. But I've also noticed that this doesn't stop us from seeking to find what's fair.

And that's fair enough. This past week, I read about a justice initiative being presented once again about a Fair Minimum Wage. Every few years, this needs to be re-negotiated: what's a fair wage? In that case, fair is being presented as what's just. What's right. The workers demand - and deserve - a fair wage, one that they can live on. Employers demand a wage that won't put them out of business and will enable a profit to their shareholders.

This parable that Jesus told about the Workers in the Vineyard is a parable about fair wages, great expectations, and unexpected ways that grace and generosity challenge our ideas of fairness. It's a parable found only in the book of Matthew, and it comes in the context of conversations about high expectations for entering the kingdom of God, and some wrangling for status for those who are in...

The setting of the parable reflects the life and culture in the Ancient Nearest in Jesus' day. Unemployment then, as now, was common. Thus there were people waiting in the marketplace

looking to be hired for a daily wage. The customary daily wage of the time was a denarius. According to Jewish law, wages for labour were to be paid at the end of each working day. According to Deuteronomy 24:14 “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wage daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry out to the Lord against you and you would incur guilt. And Leviticus 19:13: “You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning”

So nothing in the opening scene would have been shocking - an employer goes out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard, and agrees to pay them a denarius at the end of the day. He is a good employer, caring for the needs of the workers, and wanting to follow the laws of justice. So far, so good. He returns to the marketplace a few hours later, around 9 a.m and finds more workers for the harvest. He agrees to pay them “whatever is right”. Again, a good employer. He goes out again at noon, and around 3 in the afternoon, and again hires more workers. This starts to be a bit curious - why did he not hire enough people at the beginning of the day; and why weren't these labourers ready for work when the workday began? Is he hiring the workers because he needs the labour, or because they need the work? It's starting to feel like he's hiring them just to give them a job - what a generous employer! Again, an hour before the close of the day, he hires some more workers. This is practically absurd! By the time they get to the field to start picking, they'll hardly have broken a sweat before it's time to call it a day! Truly, this is no ordinary employer. But it gets more strange:

Now comes the close of the day, when payment is rendered. “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last hired and going on to the first.” Imagine the scene of hot and sweaty workers lined up for their pay. The first in line - the last of the day - receive their denarius - a whole day's wage for an hour's work! Imagine the expression on their faces, the lightness of their steps! Those hired at 3 and at noon receive the same denarius! Imagine their expression. How might they feel? I imagine they were astonished, delighted, grateful, in awe of their good fortune and the generosity of their new employer.

But how might it feel to be the ones at the end of the line, who had worked all day long? As the line proceeded, those first hired experienced their expectations rising. But in the end, they too receive a denarius. Watching everyone else receive a denarius, too, now the denarius seemed quite insufficient. The Bible says, “when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.” When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. “It's not fair! Those who were hired last worked only one hour - and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.”

What say you? Do they have a point? I certainly think so! From their perspective, a fair wage is necessarily relative to the labour put in. They worked for 12 hours, the others only 1. How is it fair that both receive the same coin? Do they not **deserve** more than those who worked for

such a short time? Shouldn't greater effort reap a greater reward? This is certainly foundational to our capitalist work ethic.

Together with the question of what the hard workers deserve, there's also the question what the latecomers deserve. Those first workers were there in the marketplace early in the morning, ready to work. They showed up, worked hard, and earned their wage. At 9 a.m, the employer went to the marketplace and found still more people there "doing nothing". Presumably they were not there at the crack of dawn when the others were. But why? And then those at noon? At 3 in the afternoon? Where were they earlier in the day? "No one has hired us" they say. But why not? Is there something suspicious? Some thinkers have judged that these late-comers were less desirable workers - perhaps ethically less outstanding, perhaps physically diminished - in some way less deserving of the day's wage. Perhaps they weren't. The story doesn't actually tell us why they were overlooked earlier in the day - although it seems that they showed up late to the marketplace. Did they deserve what they got? Didn't they deserve less?

Scholars like to consider various scenarios as to why they were up for hire at such odd hours: Perhaps they were drunk, and overslept; not the ideal employees. Perhaps they were disabled and thus overlooked earlier in the day. Perhaps there were just too many people needing work, and they were surplus. And they didn't even have their own patch of land to garden when they were not hired, so they remained at the market place. Does it matter? Does it change your perspective of what's fair and what's not? Does it matter who is "deserving" and who isn't? This is a big question for some in terms of distributing charity. Who are the deserving poor? Can we, should we, limit our generosity to those who will use our funds well? Can we, should we, limit our care from those who got themselves into this mess by their own bad choices, and reserve our gifts for those who are simply on a string of bad luck? What do we learn about care and generosity from this vineyard owner?

Listen to the argument of the vineyard owner, who says to the grumbling worker: "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I WANT to give the one who was last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" The vineyard owner - whom we can all now acknowledge represents God, promised to be fair and just to all - and by simple measurements was fair and just. But God is also free to exceed legalistic standards and measurements, God is free to be extravagant and generous. Blogger Bob Cornwall says "God's economy is "unflinchingly generous". I'd call it abundant grace.

And sometimes that generosity gets stuck in our craw, the parable demonstrates. We human beings can get resentful about funny things. God's grace doesn't always strike us as fair. In the early church, there was grumbling between the Jewish believers and the gentile believers about how much of the Jewish law Christ's followers should observe. Paul argued vehemently in favour of leniency towards the gentiles, and in one strong passage in Romans quotes God speaking to Moses: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, I will show compassion to those on whom I will show compassion." (Romans 9:15). When we're dealing with God, we can expect that mercy and compassion will be generous. When we're dealing with Jesus,

we're talking about extra miles, and turning the other cheek. Err on the side of flagrant grace and mercy. And in the Greek imagery provided by this parable, to take offense at God's generosity to others, as the first workers in the parable did, is to look at God's goodness with an evil or envious eye. Literally, the greek says: Is your eye evil because I am good?"

What you feel about grace depends a whole lot on where you stand in the line. As the good reformer Martin Luther himself preached: "Thus, those who are the first, in the eye of man (sic), that is, those who consider themselves, or let themselves be considered as nearest or the first before God, they are the opposite before God, they are the last in his eyes, and farthest from him."

And Jesus concludes: So the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. It all sounds good unless you're the first one who gets shunted to the end of the line, right? Perspective is always important when you're reading scripture. And in Scripture, it's important to remember that divine preference is always given to the poor and needy. (aka "preferential option for the poor). The last shall be first. The first shall be last. Good news for the poor, tough luck for the rich. And indeed this story from Matthew 20 comes right after Matthew 19 where Jesus meets the rich man, and tells him to give away all he has, and the man walks away. "Truly, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven".

Peter says, "Then who can be saved?" If the rich man, who has followed the commandments to a T, isn't a shoo-in for God's favour, then who is? (because then, as now, people often felt that being wealthy was a sign of God's favour". And then there is yet another interesting twist - because just as it seems the odds are against the wealthy, grace strikes again. Jesus says, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." It is difficult for the rich to follow God's ways, but God makes it possible. God can soften the hearts even of the rich towards compassion, generosity and love, so that they belong in the kingdom.

The impossible is possible, because participating in the Kingdom of God is not bought by an exchange of effort or goods. Salvation is a gift, pure and simple. We are all the workers in the vineyard, called whenever and however and whoever we are to serve in the vineyard. And we all receive the same reward - God's salvation, God's grace. And that is good news for everyone.

No-one really wants to argue with grace. Right? But we do, in so many ways both subtle and not so subtle. Judging each other, gossiping, pointing the finger of blame; trying to draw the line of righteousness around sexuality, orientation, political leanings, views toward the other.

And on the flip side, when we consider ourselves last - when we look at ourselves with a critical eye, and see our doubts and failures, our sin and shortcomings - we often count ourselves too easily out of God's grace (or out of the grace of God's community). We see our failings, our shortcomings, our doubts, our history, ... and we say - there's no way I'll ever be good enough for this schtick. Count me out. I know too many people who have left the church with this sort of mindset.

But that's not how God doles out the wages. For if God is the landowner, and we are the workers, the denarius, or the daily wage - represents love, grace, and salvation. The favour of the Lord cannot be earned, and is the same for all regardless of how hard some try, how far some have fallen; whether we have been following the rules since we were born, or whether we just started getting in line with faith - we're all given a chance to serve, and to receive the same reward. And we are offered that grace with abundant, flagrant - dare I say UNFAIR - generosity.

The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

And that is good news for today. AMEN.