

Sermon on Matthew 20:1-16 – September 17/18, 2011 – The Unfair Fairness of God

Grace and peace to you from our heavenly Father through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

My wife's grandpa back in Minnesota is a hard working guy. He was raised on his family's farm back in Mahtomedi and because of that upbringing he valued a good, honest day's work. Now, of course, he's retired, but he always stays busy – fixing things, doing things around the house, helping out his kids and his grandkids in any way he can. Well one day we were talking. He was telling me about some things – like who the hard workers in the family are and who tend to be the more, to put it nicely, not so work inclined ones. But then out of the clear blue, he mentioned a text from Scripture to me and he said, “You know Chris, there are a lot of good Bible passages, but one that I like the least is the one about the people working. Some worked a long time, others worked barely at all, and they all got paid the same thing! That just isn't fair. I don't like that story.”

And I would say, who can blame him? If someone works longer than someone they should be fairly compensated, no? I can't even imagine what sort of uproar might happen at the mill if the payment policy switched to this. Just imagine the headlines in the Daily Press, “Local Paper Mill Pays all People Same Wage.” I bet the newly hired hands there would be celebrating to no end while the folks who have been there for over 10 or 20 years might be just a little upset.

Let's recap the text. The Scripture passage we have here is a parable, and parables were meant to provoke a reaction – they're meant to get you thinking. They're meant to upset and startle you. Last week we heard about the parable of the unforgiving servant – the one who should have forgiven because his lord forgave his debt. And this week we have this parable where Jesus

turns everything upside down. We notice right away in this passage that even though how it ends seems unfair, right away in the beginning we see how fair this agreement was. In verse 2 we notice how the landowner and the workers agree about the daily wage – a denarii – in today’s terms, maybe about \$60 if you make minimum wage. So the fact that these workers, the workers who agreed on the wage at the start of the day, got upset once they got paid is kind of ridiculous – after all, they did agree on how much to get paid. Then we see that the landowner, in this parable the landowner is God of course, we see that the landowner hires a few more groups of workers. The first group that was hired started at 9 AM. The second group started at Noon. The third group started at 3 PM. And the fourth group started at 5 PM, an hour or so before the vineyard closed up shop. So at the end of the long and busy day the landowner pays all the workers, and here is where my wife’s grandpa got upset, the landowner pays everyone the same thing. Pretty unfair for those guys who worked all day in the sun and the heat.

And that’s what this parable is about – the unfair fairness of God. So when Jesus teaches us this parable, that’s something we’re meant to see; the unfair fairness of God. Another way we can get a sense of this is from the movie “Field of Dreams.” For those of you who haven’t seen the movie, the basic plot of the movie is that a farmer makes this baseball field for these dead baseball players to play on. Well, at the end of the movie the farmer, “Ray” (Kevin Costner) sees “Terry” (James Earl Jones), a guy he befriended, go into the cornfields with all the dead baseball players. Ray gets angry, and who can blame him? He built the baseball field; he wants to see where those baseball players are going! But he doesn’t, he can’t. That’s not part of the deal.

Who can't feel bad for Ray. Who can't feel bad for the workers who worked all day and probably deserved to make more than the other ones? I still remember the day I graduated from college and saw some classmates of mine walk the stage with me – class mates that went to class maybe two or three times in the semester – they didn't deserve their degree, but here they were walking up right beside me getting the same thing that I earned. But that's part of the problem here. When we read or hear a parable like this, where do we often place ourselves? We often put ourselves right in the place of the one who was wronged.

Now, I know that many of you may have been wronged or treated unfairly sometime in your life at work, at home, at school, by friend, foe, or family member. But this text isn't primarily about that. We live in a broken world and for too many people life is simply unfair – but that's just the sad reality of things, something that God will take care of on his own time. However, what this passage speaks to us is about the unfair fairness of God. Because if we read this text thinking that we are the victims, we are reading it wrong. What Jesus wants us to see in this passage is that we are the ones who are getting paid for a full day's work for doing next to nothing at all. We are the undeserving recipients of God's grace and forgiveness.

The last verse of this parable says, "The last will be first, and the first will be last." So what Jesus is telling us here is that you all are not the first ones who have worked tirelessly day in and day out, you are the last ones who everyone is envious about. You are the newly hired hand at the mill who is going to receive the benefits of working for 30 years even though you've been there one day. You are the one walking into the "field of dreams" for doing absolutely nothing. You are the one who is going to walk across the graduation stage and receive a diploma or degree

even though you've been in school for about a week all four years. You are the ones my wife's grandpa would get upset about. You are one of the last ones. Now, this is the only time and place where you will celebrate being last, because as Jesus says, "the last will be first."

So what we want and need is both an unfair and a fair God. We want an unfair God because if God is going to pay us the wages we deserve, then what we deserve is nothing. Actually it's worse than that: what we deserve and have earned is God's wrath, condemnation, and judgment. As it says in Scripture, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). So we want an unfair God who will deal with us with not according to what we deserve, because we all are workers in the vineyard coming to work at the last minute.

But we also want a fair God who is just and righteous. And we do have a fair God – and fortunately for all of us God exacted his justice, his judgment, his anger, his wrath not upon us but upon Himself, upon Jesus Christ. So in Jesus Christ we see both the unfairness of God for us, and the fairness of God for us. God is unfair because he doesn't count our sin, our trespasses, all the wrongs we have committed or ever will commit, God doesn't count that against us because his Son paid the price for all of our sin. And God is fair because he takes sin and the brokenness of humanity, our sin and our brokenness, takes it upon himself, puts it to death on the cross. So that is how we have unfair and fair God – an unfair God for you, paying you a wage you don't deserve which forgiveness here and now and life eternal in the age to come. And a fair God who pours all his wrath, anger, and judgment not on you but on himself in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as Jesus promises us, “the first will be last and the last will be first.” May you, the last ones, rejoice in this promise. And may you, the last ones, share this good news with other people who are the last ones too. Thanks be to God that he would be so gracious to all of us. Amen.