

SERMON for Sunday, September 18, 2005  
Matthew 20:1-16 Psalm 145:1-8

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### Is God Fair?

Is God fair? That's the issue of the parable that Jesus told his disciples, the parable of the workers in the vineyard, or the parable of the landowner, or of the generous employer. It's a very simple story of normal village life. The grapes were at their prime, and the weather was just right, the vineyard owner needed extra workers to harvest them quickly. Unemployed men, willing to pick up a day's work when they could, gathered in the marketplace, so that was where the landowner headed in the morning on the day of the harvest. He hired some workers to work a full day at the usual wage, from sunrise to sunset. Three times during the day, seeing that additional workers were needed if they were to get the grapes picked before dark, more men were hired from the pool of laborers at the town square. A fair wage was promised for their help. Some of the workers had been waiting to pick up even an hour or two of work, and were glad for the opportunity. The picking of the grapes proceeded smoothly, we assume, and the end of the day came and the time for all the temporary field hands to get paid. And here is the surprise of the parable by which Jesus taught truth. The ones who had been hired for the last shift, the ones hired at five o'clock, got paid for a whole day, at the regular rate. The ones who worked all day received the agreed upon wage for their work as well. You can imagine the conversation that began! And the grumbling, and the resentment that started to build. How unfair it all was! Some worked long, hard day in the hot sun, and others worked an hour or two towards the cool of the evening, and all had the same paycheck. Whether you worked twelve hours or one hour, the money was the same.

I do not like this story. It is discomfiting, disturbing, disheartening. It is offensive. It disrupts all that we value and affirm, confirming our underlying suspicion and fear that the world will not be fair to us, that God is not fair. Is God fair? We have asked it over and over again in the past weeks, as we watch our TVs, seeing flood waters rise and disaster unfold, as we see the pictures of children separated from their parents, and how some are reunited and others are not, as we hear tales of homes and goods and livelihoods lost. We ask the question of fairness when some military personnel are sent to Iraq and others not, when one mother's daughter dies there and another's returns home safely, when civilians are killed and a homeland destroyed, and others watch from afar. We ask the question of fairness when we mark the somber anniversary of terrorist destruction, when despite our solemn declarations children are left behind in our schools and millions of children in Africa are left without parents due to the ravages of HIV/AIDS, and other children have more than enough of nearly everything. Rabbi Harold Kushner asked the question when his two-year-old son was diagnosed with a disease that meant sure death by the age of twelve, and he wrote his now classic best-seller about his struggle, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. He writes, "How does one handle news like that? I was a young, inexperienced rabbi, not as familiar with the process of grief as I would later come to be, and what I mostly felt that day was a deep, aching sense of unfairness. It didn't make sense. I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. More than that, I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families. I believed that I was following God's ways and doing God's work. How could this be

happening to my family? If God existed, if God was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could God do this to me?"

I don't know. I don't know if we will ever answer in full, in this life, about why this seeming unfairness happens. But Jesus, in the story of the vineyard owner, does give us an answer to a question we did not ask. At the end of the day, at the end of life, at every moment in between, God is generous, far more generous to us than we deserve. Like the landowner who paid all the workers with a generous hand, God is not fair. God is always on our side, leading us when we stray, forgiving us when we forget that we are God's, healing us from the inside as well as without, shaking us up when we need an awakening, giving us far more than we deserve or merit, challenging us when we begin to coast, and loving us forever. God is not fair. God is gracious.

But just because we have named it does not mean that we understand it. Episcopal preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tries to get at it this way: " We get grace all mixed up with good fortune, and we prefer that it fall to those who deserve it. When it lands on someone else we call it 'dumb luck'. 'You must be doing something right', we say lamely, loath to believe that God's grace might be unrelated to human doing. 'There but for the grace of God go I' can be one of the cruelest things we have learned to say on the subject. The phrase assumes the absence of grace in another's life...It supposes that God sees things the way we do, which is highly unlikely. If anything, grace teaches me the exact opposite. Bowled over by God's gratuitous kindness toward me, I discover that I do not know what I deserve. Under the mysterious working of God's grace, I get more than I give and I give more than I have got. My spiritual math collapses. One plus one does not equal two but at least three and perhaps three thousand."

The idea of grace, the word grace, is easily tossed about in the church, used when we have no other explanation. One theologian said that, " Even though I have grown up in the church, I doubt that I could give a very clear explanation of grace as it has been traditionally used to someone who was unchurched. The theological picture I seem to have received from my church upbringing is that grace is sprinkled from heaven like snowflakes. If I was lucky, if I was standing in the right place at the right time, it would land on my shoulders. If grace happened, it would be a big deal - a major spiritual even - but it seemed somehow random, infrequent and certainly beyond my control."

And Martin Luther, along with philosophers and preachers and poets, tried as well, when he commented, "Faith does not require information, knowledge and certainty, but a free surrender and a joyful bet on God's unfelt, untried and unknown goodness."

God is not fair, but God is generous. God undergirds all of our living, even through tragedy and trial and tribulation, with the assurance of God's presence. We sing "Amazing Grace" and truly stand in awe at the Lord's promise of goodness. But then what? Walk away on tiptoe, waiting for the next time we need some help? Perhaps the real parable that Jesus told is in the part that is untold, the next chapter of the story about which we can only speculate. How do we live with grace? What did the workers do with the landowner's generous payment? As I see it, they had several options. The ones who worked all day and got no bonus could harbor great resentment at the unfairness of it all, letting it sink deep into their souls and poisoning their view of the world and everyone around them. The ones who got the

bonus had every reason to gloat over their fortune, and cheerfully go on their way to enjoy it, ignoring the disappointed ones. Any of them could have thanked the owner for hiring them in the first place. We don't know how that story turned out. But we can write the chapter of our own story. What will we do with God's grace?

Lutheran Walter Bouman, theology professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, died last month, and a tribute was written by Presbyterian John Buchanan, editor of Christian Century magazine and pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. This is the best continuation of the parable of the workers in the vineyard that I could ever tell. Buchanan writes, "(Walt Bouman) could not teach or preach without celebrating and loving the way the gospel of Jesus Christ intersects with the world...Several months ago a routine physical exam revealed a cancer that was inoperable. His physician told him he had at best a few months to live. Walt's dying was as remarkable as his living. It was faithful, worldly, wise and graced with humor. In a sermon he preached to the seminary community after the news of his illness was public, Walt recalled Woody Allen's words: 'It is impossible to experience your own death and carry a tune.' He said, 'Some things are worse than death. Have you ever spent two hours with an insurance salesman?' He referred to Psalm 90 (a favorite), 'So teach us to count our day,' and added, 'I'm counting! I'm counting!' Then this church theologian taught one more time: 'The resurrection of Jesus Christ frees us to do more with our lives than protect them. We are free to offer them. We are called to love the world, to want clean air and water for everyone, to give ourselves to the service of peace instead of blindly following our leaders in senseless wars, to commit to the cause of justice, especially when our institutions and our country are guilty of injustice. That is a big order. But you are free to pursue it by the resurrection of Christ, who has put an end to the dominion of death. We are free for the battle because the victory is already won.' And he concluded by saying that he had been praying a little prayer that he first prayed in German as a child:

Lord Jesus, who does love me, Oh, spread thy wings above,  
And shield me from alarm.  
Though evil would assail me Thy mercy will not fail me.  
I rest in thy protecting arms."

When we baptize Gannon Cole this morning, there will be no promise for magical protection for Gannon or for his parents. We with them will be standing around the font filled with water, standing in grace. His life, and ours, will be filled with disappointments and discouragements. We will know sadness and tragedy, our own and in the world around us. And we might even shout in anger and resentment at the God who seems so unfair. Then we will fall on our knees at the table, where the hand of God generously feeds us with love. And then? Our part of the story has yet to be written.....Amen.