

It Isn't Fair!

Jonah 3:1—4:5 Matthew 20:1-16

As with several of Jesus' parables, this one is told in response to a conversation. So it will be helpful if we go back to what happens preceding the parable because it will help make more sense of why Jesus told this parable, and what he's saying in it. Early in Matthew 19, a man comes up to Jesus and asks "What must I do to have eternal life?" And Jesus points to the law—keep the commandments, he says. The guy replies, "Done that; check. What else?" Jesus replies, "*Sell all you have and give it to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven. Then follow me.*" And Matthew tells us that he went away sad.

Then Peter speaks up and, perhaps speaking for all of the disciples, says "We've left everything to follow you—so, what, then, will we have??" In other words, we expect to be rewarded for this. We've made sacrifices to follow you; so, what do we get?" And Jesus responds with some words of encouragement, and then he punctuates the entire dialogue with these words (end of chapter 19): "*But, many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*" And then he tells a story...

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.”

This is the word of the Lord.

This morning we have another Kingdom parable. And Kingdom parables are first and foremost about the King, and his authority—his freedom to do what he pleases, because, well, he is King. I was reading this past week in Psalm 135, and verse 6 says: “*Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth.*”

Now that's authority! God can do whatever God wants to! Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth.

And, friends, it's my joy to tell you the good news, that what pleases the Lord is to be gracious, and loving—and *generous*. If you read the rest of Psalm 135, what it says is that God, in his freedom and in his might, redeemed Israel from slavery. He is mighty to save. And that's great news for us. God is free to do whatever God wants to do, and in his freedom what he chooses to do is to love us (and everyone), because *God is love*. God saves, because it's in God's nature to save. That's who God is.

We need to remember, though, that God's graciousness and generosity are often manifested in surprising ways; ways that might even seem scandalous to us fair-minded people.

And this morning's parable is about the scandal of God's grace.

This parable makes us uneasy. Did it make you uneasy as you heard it? Was there something in here that just doesn't seem right to you? We all have buttons that get pushed, and when someone pushes it, we get upset. My most easily pushed button is my justice button. The fairness button. If someone is being treated unfairly or unequally, or is being bullied, it upsets me. And I

remember reading this parable for the first time many years ago, and it pushed my justice button. I think, hey, these guys worked a 9- or 12-hour day and along come these other guys who work only one hour, and they got paid the same amount. That's not fair. As someone in a Bible study said about this parable, somewhat jokingly, "This is completely un-American!" Which is funny on a number of levels...

But it's true, the parable runs against the grain of one of our most deeply cherished values, the value of hard work and just reward: The more you work and the more productive you are, the more you get paid. And this is the complaint of those who worked all day: "You have made them equal to us." In other words, what they are saying is, "We are *not* equal; we deserve more; we were here first and we worked longer."

The all-day workers in the parable also have a fairness button. They expect to get paid more for working more hours. It's only right. But the owner of the vineyard communicates to these all-day workers that he desires to be generous—because... he can! He is free to do so! He has the authority and the means to be generous. And so, he is.

Part of the surprise of this parable is that the all-day workers get to see the generosity and extravagance of the landowner; except they see, at first glance, that it's shown to someone else, who didn't deserve it. In their eyes, at least.

That seems to be a theme in the parables; I wonder if you have picked up on that. God is generous and gracious, and his graciousness and generosity are shown to those who don't deserve it.

For example, the younger prodigal son is welcomed home and a huge party is thrown for him. Much to the disgruntlement of the older brother who believes he is entitled to more. The Father has the authority to welcome in his lost son, and so he does, out of the extravagance and generosity of his heart.

This is a pattern that emerges in the parables: the generosity of the main characters like the managers, the landowners, the Samaritan, the Father, is shown—and it's shown, most visibly and overtly, to those who don't deserve it. *But it's also shown to the others as well*; it's also shown to those who, we might say, *deserve* it. It's just easy to miss that because *at first glance* God's grace only seems to be shown to those who don't deserve it. But when we pause, and take a longer look, we see that God's grace is shown to everyone.

God's love isn't based on a system of merits or rewards, but on the basis of God's heart of grace and love for all. This is the Kingdom of God we're talking about. And Jesus has been making it clear that the King desires to be gracious.

So the all-day workers get to see the generosity and extravagance of the landowner. But at first glance they only see it being shown to someone else who didn't deserve it.

But his generosity *is also* for them; they just hadn't figured that out yet.

These all-day workers worked under the scorching heat and the burden of the day, as they say, but they forgot something. They forgot the generosity of the fact that they had a job all day. They started the day with no work.

Think about it—the one who's earning money here. When he gets a job at 6a.m., or 9a.m., he knows that night he'll be able to feed his family. So all day long he's living in the knowledge of the faithful gift of God; the generosity of the owner of the vineyard, who employed him.

What about the guys who didn't get a job until noon? Or 3:00? Or 5:00? They had to stand around all day wondering if they were going to get enough

money to take care of their families. They had 6 hours, or 9 hours, to stand around and worry about it.

Notice how tenderly Jesus puts it (thru the vineyard owner in the parable): “Why are you still standing here idle all day?” “Because no one has hired us,” they say. Nobody, in other words, wanted us. And if you’ve ever been unemployed, you know what a stressful thing it is not knowing where the money is going to come from, or how you’re going to provide for yourself or your family. And it can feel like nobody wants you.

So, to have a job all day is a generous experience—especially to work for such a generous owner. You are wanted, and needed. And that is a gift.

The all-day workers grumbled because they thought they only saw generosity expressed toward others, when actually *they* had been experiencing it all day long in their work.

There is a strong parallel here to the parable of the prodigal son—or, as I like to call it, the parable of the extravagant father. The older son in that parable also grumbles about the father’s generosity toward the younger son who had come home. But the older brother forgot that he had been living in the house of a generous and extravagant father all along. Nothing was being taken away from

him. He just witnessed his father's generosity as it was being directed to someone who he thought didn't deserve it. And it bothered him.

Much like Jonah. As we heard, Jonah—after being “spewed” out by the fish onto the beach—finally went to Nineveh—where God had instructed him to go but he was reluctant to go—and Jonah told the people to repent. And... they repented! Hallelujah! And what was Jonah's response? He pouts. It actually made him angry. He didn't want them to repent; he didn't think they deserved it. He wanted God to let them have it. It's a funny scene when he says to God, “I knew it! I knew you were a gracious God, and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.” Darn it! The people of Nineveh got in on God's grace. But Jonah didn't realize that he got in on it too. He got to be God's messenger, and he got to witness something amazing and beautiful, in watching people turn to God in faith. What an honor.

But Jonah grumbles, the older brother grumbles, the all-day workers grumbled. And they grumbled, in my mind, because they didn't remember God's generosity toward them. God's graciousness that they had been living in all along

The first invitation to us in this parable, then, is the invitation to gratitude. To be grateful. There is an invitation for us to take stock of the ways that our

heavenly Father has been generous to us, and has provided for us. The petition “give us this day our daily bread” has been answered. Praise God!

Part of the practice of gratitude is to try to not think comparatively (I deserve more; or, look what she got, he got). The challenge is to not begrudge God’s generosity toward others, and simply give thanks for what we have been given. This is the problem with the all-day workers: instead of saying thank you for what they had been given, they compared themselves to what someone else received and they cried “It’s not fair!”

And in a way, the landowner is saying, “That’s right. It isn’t fair.” And that’s why it’s grace. Grace is always unfair. It’s unfair because it gives the undeserving what they don’t deserve. That’s what makes grace grace.

The complaint of the all-day workers was not that the master broke his word, or that he was stingy, but that he was generous with the undeserving. In fact, the owner of the vineyard kept his word perfectly to the all-day workers. When he hired them in the morning he said “I’ll pay you what’s right, what’s fair.” And at the end of the day, he did. He kept his word.

So, to make sense of Jesus’ introductory line as he launches into this parable, the lasts became firsts because of sheer grace, not because of work. The

firsts became lasts, not because of failure to work, but because of ingratitude, and the mistake of comparing themselves to what others were getting and feeling like they deserved more.

Because if we go back what took place just before this parable, Jesus' encounter with the rich young guy, where Jesus asks him to surrender everything and follow him, and the guy goes away sad... the comparison part comes when Peter, who is usually the first to say what's on his mind, says to Jesus: "We have left everything to follow you; what, then, will we have?" I love how Eugene Peterson translates that line from Peter: "*So, what do we get out of it?*" That really reveals his motive. In other words, we've been following you since the very start; we've done what you told the rich guy to do; so... we want some extra wages here, some reward. We deserve it.

And Jesus, by telling this parable, is saying that the Kingdom doesn't work like that. That's the way the *world* may work, but not with my father in his Kingdom. That doesn't mean there aren't blessings or benefits that come with following Jesus—of course there are. We experience those daily, like the all-day workers. *It's simply that the blessings and benefits aren't given to us as a reward for hard work.* They, too, are a grace gift, given by the King, freely.

God's grace is not the sort of thing we can bargain for or try to earn more of or deserve more of. The point of the story is that what people get from having served God and his Kingdom is not actually a 'wage' at all. It's not something we earn. It's all gift, based on God's promises. And when God keeps his promises, he is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally out of his overflowing generous nature. We are partners with God in his work in the world. And, we are partners with all of God's co-workers in the field of God's world. Even those who were brought on late to the work.

As we come to the Lord's table today, we come with gratitude.

Gratitude helps us appreciate God's grace in our lives.

Gratitude melts away pride and competition and comparison.

Gratitude helps us to celebrate what *others* receive as well.

Gratitude helps us see that we're all equal, in God's eyes. We all receive just what we need, when we need it.

God is free to do whatever God wants to do. And what God chooses to do is to love, and give grace. And that is what we celebrate this morning at this table. We all come, equally, no matter how long you've been a Christian, or how

new this is to you. Whether you've been a church member your whole life or you're just beginning a journey of faith. We come (with joy!).