

BIBLE READINGS: Exodus 16:2-15 Matthew 20:1-16

## SERMON

In our parable today, the labourers who worked all day protested that "it just isn't fair" when they were paid last - receiving the same amount as the labourers who only worked for an hour.

Now why do we get uptight? Isn't what the owner of the vineyard says true - he can do whatever he likes? This is what I think happens - I think we identify with those first-hired, but-paid-the-same labourers. While it's true that in a narrow legal sense the householder is just, in that he pays what he bargains, we can't help but think that there has been foul play. If the point of the parable is the generosity of the householder, we would expect those who had worked harder and longer to receive even more than they had bargained for. The problem is that this parable deliberately provokes us about the injustice of the payment to the first labourers.

In terms of ordinary human standards, this parable doesn't make much sense. How many of us would want to work as a labourer all day for the same wages as another labourer who only works for one hour? I don't think many of us would be willing to do this. Looking at it from a labourer's point of view, our wages should be determined by our seniority and the hours we work. That would be the fair and just way of looking at it. But even looking at it from the point of view of the owner of the vineyard; surely he would be concerned about the productivity of his labourers.

As the owner, it would make sense - and in the long-run be for his own benefit to give his labourers some incentive to work and be rewarded for their work. Once the labourers caught on to what the owner was doing, I don't think the owner would have too many labourers working for him for the whole day, if they received the same wages as someone who worked for only one hour. If the hiring policies of the owner remained unchanged, the owner would have many labourers who'd work for one hour, but very few who'd work for a whole day!

By worldly standards, the owner's hiring policies just don't make sense. Labourers want to get paid for a day's work if they worked a whole day, and owners don't want to pay someone for a whole day's wages if they only worked for one hour.

So what is the point of the story? What lesson do we learn? Jesus goes out of his way to avoid making some moralistic point in the story. There is no suggestion of laziness or merit on the part of any of the workers - they are just people who got to work early or late. There is no lesson for us to learn or put into practice to make the world a better place to live. Yet when God's gracious generosity cuts through my little moral equations, what happens? What I experience is not gratitude, but grumbling. When you receive grace, I grumble. When I receive it, I assume that I have earned it. Either way, grace is beyond my ability to comprehend. It always comes as a shock.

If there is any lesson in the story, if you are looking for a lesson, is that God's ways often make the world a surprising, sometimes confusing place in which to live. Jesus takes a little story and rams it into our self-satisfied, smug assumption that we have figured it all out.

Here is a story of how God's grace is so surprising - so beyond our comprehension as to be downright exasperating. It's either a story about a generous God or a grumbling humanity; either way. It isn't easy to take.

In his book, *A Grace Disguised*, Jerry Sittser describes how he lost his wife, his four-year-old daughter and his mother in a car accident.

“No one is safe, because the universe is hardly a safe place. It is often mean, unpredictable, and unjust. Loss has little to do with our notions of fairness. Some people live long and happy, though they deserve to suffer. Others endure one loss after another, though they deserve to be blessed. Loss is no more a respecter of persons and positions than good fortune is. There is often no rhyme or reason to the misery of some and to the happiness of others.”

Isn't that so true! Some people deserve more suffering in their life than they get. Others get more suffering than they deserve. How do we respond to this? It's unfair!

Okay, so life isn't fair. That's hardly news. We don't like it, and it hurts, but it's not news. At some point in our life we learn the lesson.

But, even if life isn't fair, certainly we can expect God to be fair.

Life isn't fair, but God is. I can count on God to be fair. When life is just one disappointment after another, at least I can count on God to be fair!

Jerry Sittser writes more about the loss of his family:

“Over time I began to be bothered by the assumption that I had a right to complete fairness. Granted, I did not deserve to lose three members of my family. But then again, I am not sure I deserved to have them in the first place. Lynda was a woman of superior qualities, and she loved me through some very hard times. My mother lived well and served people to her life's end, and she showed a rare sensitivity to me during my rebellious teenage years. (My daughter) Diana Jane sparkled with enthusiasm for life and helped to fill our home with noise and excitement. Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths; but I did not deserve their presence in my life, either. On the face of it, living in a perfectly fair world appeals to me. But deeper reflection makes me wonder. In such a world I might never experience tragedy; but neither would I experience grace, especially the grace God gave me in the form of the three wonderful people whom I lost. So, God spare us a lifetime of fairness! To live in a world with grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world might make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We might get what we deserve - but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would really be satisfied. A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering.”

Life is not fair. Unfortunate, but not news. No - the news is that God isn't fair! We wouldn't stand a chance otherwise.