

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20A)

September 21, 2014

Text: Matthew 20:1–16

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

After several months in the book of Romans, we return today back to the appointed gospel readings for our sermon texts. And what a great text we have today! If I can't preach a decent Law/Gospel sermon from this passage of Scripture, then we need to meet with the elders and get me some remedial training, and that most quickly.

But since I mentioned Law and Gospel, it might be good to start with a thought question. Do you want what's fair, what's rightly coming to you? Or do you want what is given graciously? You may be thinking, this is a church service and we've been taught from day one that we should seek and desire God's grace. What God gives graciously is what I'm supposed to answer. But what do you really want? According to which way do you live your life?

Isn't there that part of us that thinks that if we all got what we deserve then the world would be a much better place? Let's live fair and square with each other and all will be well. You've heard the oft-spoken refrain that comes in many different ways, "That's not fair!" In an ideal world, all would ever-Steven, fair and square, right down the middle!!

Today's parable will make you shout "That's outrageously and unscrupulously unfair!" Are you ready? Keep in mind the original question, "Do you want what's fair or what is given graciously?" The parable starts out simple enough. Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard" (vs. 1).

We're not all farmer here but I think we all appreciated the sense of urgency at harvest time. Everybody chips in until the harvest is in. So, the vineyard owner needs extra help with the harvest. He goes out early in the morning to the marketplace and finds a group of day laborers. According to vs. 2, the vineyard owner and the laborers agree on the terms of employment: one full day of work for a denarius. In the ancient world, a denarius was the standard day's wage for 12 hours of work. A roughly

modern equivalent would be to say \$100 for 12 hours of work. So what's fair is a denarius for 12 hours of work. That's the agreement.

Off to work they go. But Jesus, through the story of the parable, then describes the vineyard owner going out again at various times in the day to hire more laborers. It's a good harvest! He hires workers at the 3rd, 6th, and 9th hours, times roughly equivalent to 9 am, noon, and 3 pm. But this group is different than the first group. For these workers who will have worked fewer hours, the vineyard owner says (vs. 4), "You go in the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you." Notice the conditions, "whatever is right" and "I will give you." No promises are given except what is right as determined by the owner; he will give according to his own sense of justice.

And then comes the final group. According to vs. 6, the vineyard owner goes out again at the 11th hour, roughly 5 p.m. It's the harvest, more work needs to be done. More workers are needed even for the last hour. So the owner goes out again in the highways and bylaws and finds more men. Vs. 6, "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?'" They answer, "No one has hired us." Back to vs. 7b, the owner says, "You go into the vineyard too." He hires them too even though there is only 1 hour left in the day. They are called to work in the owner's vineyard in spite of the fact they've been idle all day. Should we think of them as deadbeats? The idle, lazy, rabble-rousers that nobody else wanted to hire and for good reason. I like to think of them this way as it helps heighten the drama of the parable.

But do you notice what the vineyard owner says to them. Go into the vineyard too! No promises are made. No agreements. Just go into the vineyard. Pure invitation. And a rather open-ended one at that. The owner didn't set a wage or a timeframe. Just go.

Vs. 8 is where the fun begins. The work day is over and the vineyard owner tells the foreman to line up the workers but in a particular order: begin with the last ones hired and go back in order to those hired at the beginning of the day. The workers are lined up, first to last according to the number of hours worker. Those workers who worked but one hour are paid a single denarius (vs. 9). Now that's a shocking surprise! All full day's wage for one hour of work! Remember our modern example? One hour of work for \$100. This vineyard owner is extremely generous, it appears.

The rest of the workers see this extraordinary pay. We've worked longer than 1 hour so we should get paid more than a denarius. That would be fair, right? Down the line

the foreman goes. Those who worked 3 hours, 1 denarius. Those who worked 6 hours, 1 denarius. Those who worked 9 hours, 1 denarius. These are the workers who weren't promised a set wage, only that which is right. And the vineyard owner determines that they should receive the same wage regardless of how many hours they worked. Everyone is being treated equal.

How would you like to be one of the guys who worked 6 hours and got paid the same of the deadbeats who worked only one hour?

Vs. 10 records how things transpire between the landowner and the workers hired at the very beginning of the day, "Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius." Now that's not fair! It's outrageous that men who work a full 12 hours should be paid the same amount as men who worked only 1 hour. One group is paid, according to our modern analogy, \$100/hour the other \$8.33/hour. We'd sue! Contact legal authorities! Call the newspaper and expose this scoundrel for the cheat that he is! This is so unfair it's got to be stopped. We worked longer and produced more under harsher conditions. That's the essence of vs. 11-12.

The problem with this group of workers is that they weren't considering the generosity of the landowner. He wants to pay everyone the same amount regardless of the merit or worthiness of the workers; his business principle is generosity and grace. This first group of workers is comparing themselves against the other workers and concludes that they deserve more. Their merit is greater than other workers. They should be paid more; that's fair and square.

The owner's response is firm. Vs. 13-15, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" One way to read this is something like this: Hey buddy, I've paid you fair and square just like we agreed. What I choose to do with my money is my business and if I choose to be generous then what's that to you? So get your tail out of here along with that ungrateful, miserly heart of yours.

Sound harsh? Jesus said these words to unbelieving people on the Last Day in Matthew 25:41-43, 46, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty

and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me....’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

I must confess that this wasn’t how I read this parable at first. But then two things made me rethink this conclusion. This is a parable about God’s kingdom using the image of the harvest as the backdrop. In the Bible, the harvest is commonly used symbolically to represent the Last Day and the promised divine judgment that every man, woman, and child will face. We mustn’t forget about that sense of urgency which accompanies the Gospel of the Lord Jesus. Jesus died and rose again from the dead to save people from sin, death, the devil, and God’s righteous wrath against all ungodliness. On the Last Day, people will either hear “Well done, thou good and faithful servant; enter into eternal joy” or “depart, you cursed, into the fires prepared for the devil and his angels.”

I want this parable to be shocking in its impact. For it would have been to those who first heard it. But we mustn’t lose sight of what’s shocking about it....the amazing generosity of the landowner. He wants to give generously and graciously to everyone without consideration of works or merit or worthiness. He’s not interested in what’s fair but what’s gracious and good. And that’s what the Gospel of Jesus is all about!

If I started singing Amazing Grace at this very moment, you’d be able to join in instantly. We know and love that beautiful hymn. And yet do we consider that the grace of Jesus is shockingly amazing? Does it bother you to think that the sinner (and you can insert whatever vile immorality/crime you’d like) who repents and embraces Jesus in faith shortly before His death, who never went to church, never gave a dime in the offering, and would know a hymn from a her, receives the same reward of heaven and the saving presence of God as the Lutheran baptized as a infant, grew up going to church and Sunday School almost weekly, attended midweek Advent and Lenten services, went to catechism class and memorized Luther’s Small Catechism, attended summer youth camps, ate countless potlucks, and maybe even listened to a little Prairie Home Companion on the side? Does that bother you?

That’s the amazing generosity of God the Father. He chooses to be generous regardless of the merits of the person. Because of Jesus, heaven is open to every man, woman, and child. He died to pay for the sins of all people because He loves all people and wants them in His eternal kingdom. The Gospel message is this, “Come into my vineyard. I will give what is good and right.” The landowner, God, only

promises to give according to His own sensibilities. He's outrageously gracious. So much so that you might even be tempted to begrudge His generosity. But His ways are not our ways. He's determined to pardon abundantly.

The Gospel of Jesus isn't fair. Strike that kind of thinking from your mind. But it is good and generous because God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is unbelievably good and generous. So, come and receive the generosity of the Lord Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.