

“It May Not Seem Fair, But God is Always Good”

Date: Sept. 18, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Theme: Grace; God’s nature

Occasion: Pentecost 14, Year A

An old “Family Circus” comic strip shows the two boys Jeff and Billy squabbling over the size of their slice of pie, which mom has set before them. “They aren’t the same,” Jeff pouts. Mom tries again, evening up the slices. Still, Jeff is upset. “They still aren’t the same!” he whines. This time Mom uses a ruler and absolutely proves that both slices of pie are exactly the same size. “But Mom,” Jeff complains, “I want mine to be just like Billy’s, only bigger!”

We smile and chuckle to ourselves, amused at this child’s sense of fairness. But how like Jeffy we all are. We all tend to think we deserve a bigger slice of the pie. From the time we are little children we are taught that doing more is worth more. If you work hard you deserve more. We have a sense of fairness and equality.

Jesus’ story doesn’t sit well with us. Remember the story with me, again. It was the harvest time of the year. At 7am a wealthy landowner went to the Town Square to hire laborers. Then again at 9, and then noon, and then again at 3 o’clock he came back to town and hired still others. Toward the end of the day there was still a need for more men. Perhaps this was a harvest of grapes that had to be brought in before the rains began. So at 5 pm the landowner went back into town to hire more workers.

At sunset all of the men lined up to be paid. When they got their envelopes, lo and behold, all of them had been paid the same amount. The men who had worked 12 hours had been paid the same as the men who had worked only one hour. This enraged the day-long workers. But the landowner replied, “Do you begrudge me my generosity? Am I not allowed to do what I please with what

belongs to me?”

This parable must have fallen like a big thud upon the ears of its listeners. It doesn't seem fair. A landowner who pays equal wages for men who do not work equal hours. Why, that's not the American way. It goes against our notion of fair labor practice. Who would work all day, if you could simply wait till the last hour and then collect a day's pay?

Truth is, that deep within us we have sympathy for those grumbling laborers. The story that Jesus told turns our whole economic system upside down. But that, you see, is the whole point. God's economy is totally different than our economy. God's economy is based on grace, not on merit.

There are three terms I'd like to share with you, that I hope will explain this point. The three words are justice, mercy and grace. **Justice** is *getting* what you deserve. It's the way of the world. What goes around comes around. You get what you deserve. It resonates with our sense of fairness.

Mercy is *not getting* what you deserve. A child disobeys a parent and expects to be punished, but instead the parent offers forgiveness. A man stands before the judge, guilty as charged. As an act of mercy, the judge forgives and lets the person have another chance before going to jail. Mercy is not getting what you deserve.

But grace, **grace** is getting what you don't deserve. I'm a sinner, but God treats me like a favored son. Think of the prodigal son, who is welcomed home and gets a robe and a ring and feast. Not because he deserves it, but because the Father loves him. **Grace** is getting what you don't deserve. Now, think of those 5 o'clock day workers.

Jesus didn't tell this story to describe fair labor relations. He told the story to tell us about God's amazing love. You and I don't get what we deserve. In the sight

of an all holy and righteous God, we all fall short of the glory of God and we all deserve spiritual death and separation from God. But in God's grace, we get what we don't deserve: God's love and acceptance.

I think part of the reason we have such a hard time understanding this parable, or accepting its implications, is that most of us identify with the workers who got there at 6 in the morning. We've accepted Christ, we're part of the church, we serve on committees and go on mission trips and sing in the choir. We're doing God's work, and many of us have been at this for a long time. So long, in fact, that we feel that we *deserve* God's love. Look at all we do for the Lord.

But the truth is, we should really identify with the workers who came at the 11th hour. We are all sinners in need of grace. We receive God's love, not because of our goodness, but because of God's great love for us. Each and every one of us. The person who comes late is just as important as the person who comes early. The bishops need forgiveness just as much as the newest convert. A story:

A large, prosperous downtown church in London had three small mission churches under its care, churches that it had helped get started. On the first Sunday of the New Year all the members of the mission churches came to the city church for a combined Communion service. In those mission churches, located in the slums of the city, were some outstanding cases of conversions -former thieves, burglars, prostitutes and so on. But they all knelt, side by side, at the communion rail.

On one such occasion, the pastor saw a former burglar kneeling beside a judge of the Supreme Court of England - the judge who had sent him to jail where he had served seven years. After his release, this burglar had been converted and became a Christian worker. Yet, as they knelt there, the judge and the former convict neither seemed to be aware of the other.

After the service, the judge was walking home with the pastor and said to him, “Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the communion rail this morning?” The pastor replied, “Yes, but I didn’t know that you noticed.”

The two walked along in silence for a few more moments, and then the judge said, “What a miracle of grace.” The pastor nodded in agreement. “Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace.” Then the judge said, “But to whom do *you* refer?” And the pastor said, “Why, to the conversion of that convict.”

The judge said, “But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself.” The pastor, surprised, replied, “You were thinking of yourself? I don’t understand.” “Yes,” said the judge, “It didn’t cost that burglar much to get converted when he came out of jail. He had nothing but a history of crime behind him, and when he saw Jesus as his savior he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help.

“But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take communion and so on. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge.

“Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit **I** was a sinner on a level with that burglar. It took much more grace to forgive me for all of my pride and self-deception, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than that convict that I sent to prison.” And the pastor was silent.

Do you find Jesus parable unfair? Maybe it is because you have not realized how great is the Father’s love for all of His people. Perhaps you feel as though you deserve God’s love, and even special credit because you’re a Christian serving the Lord. But in truth, as the judge discovered for himself, at the foot of the cross, we

are all equal.

And to all who will receive we get what we don't deserve - grace. It may not seem fair. But God is always good, always willing to love and forgive, and to give the kingdom to all who will receive it. That's grace. That's our God! Amen?
Amen!