

“It’s Not Fair – It’s Grace!”

“Am I allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

The coming of autumn brings back wonderful memories: crisp, fresh air; the brilliant colours of fall foliage; Saturday afternoon high school football games; apple cider and donuts; and, in my childhood, the smell of burning leaves. It was also a time in which my friends and I sought to make some extra spending money by raking leaves in the yards of our neighbours; but while this was a successful enterprise for us, it also became the arena of some very heated arguments. We would constantly be bickering over who was doing the most work, who raked the most leaves, and therefore who deserved the most money in return. The homeowners (who I sure grew tired of our constant arguments) would pay us a set fee, which at the time I believe was \$5.00, leaving it to us to divide it among ourselves. Since there were five of us, the math should have been simple: \$1.00 per person. But nothing was simple for us; Dave would argue that since he was the leader who got the jobs for us that he deserved a bigger cut, while Gary would counterargue that he had raked the largest area in the yard. Wayne would chime in that his pile of leaves was higher, while Mark would try to convince us that since he was working the hill that he put in the most effort. I was far from innocent in this scrum, making the case that my superior reach got leaves from places the others couldn’t reach. Throughout these frequently heated arguments, one phrase could be heard repeatedly: *“That’s not fair!”*

Fairness was at the heart of many of our “friendly” arguments throughout all seasons. No matter what game we were playing, invariably an argument would break out when one side or the other felt that someone had cheated to win. When we went to Dairy Queen, there would be distress if one person’s ice cream cone appeared to be bigger than anyone else’s. We would get out a ruler to measure each person’s soda glass to make certain that everyone got the exact same amount of beverage. When we went to the Peanut Shop, we would count out the peanuts so that no one got even one more than anyone else. Any attempt to gain an advantage or to take more than anyone else was met with loud cries and stern rebukes centered on those three dreaded words: *“That’s not fair!”* Our innate understanding of fairness as children was not misguided, because fairness is at the heart of our understanding of justice and equality. Fairness guides how we organize society; laws are enacted to make certain that everyone receives fair treatment in work, in housing, and in the justice system. Labour unions were established to ensure fair practices in employment, and government agencies work to enforce fairness laws in many areas of society. Justice is also at the heart of biblical teaching; the prophet Micah proclaimed to the people of Israel that *“he has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8). The psalmist called on all people to rejoice in God’s fairness and justice: *“Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.”* (Psalm 67:4). The messianic hopes of Israel were grounded in their desire for a Redeemer who would rule the people in fairness and justice: *“He is the divinely commissioned guardian of law and justice, to whom are particularly commended the*

poor and those deprived of their rights: indeed he is to his subjects the ‘breath of life’ (Lamentations 4:20).” (Gerhard von Rad).

These principles of fairness and justice appear are at the heart of Jesus’ parable in today’s Gospel lesson, but they also appear to be under attack in this story of “*a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard*” (Matthew 20:1). This was a familiar practice at the time, with day labourers being hired at sunrise and paid at the end of the day in accordance with Torah regulation and Jewish practice:

- “You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning.” – Leviticus 19:13.
- “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on the; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.” – Deuteronomy 24:14-15.

The landowner chooses labourers and agrees to pay them “*the usual daily wage*,” a denarius which was the normal day’s pay for manual labourers hired by the day, but barely enough to maintain a family at a subsistence level.

For reasons that are left unexplained, the group of labourers who are hired at sunrise are insufficient for the work that needs to be accomplished in the landowner’s vineyard; Jesus also does not explain why the landowner does the hired instead of sending his manager. The landowner returns to the marketplace where he hired his original group of workers at nine o’clock; when he sees other standing idle there, he invites them to “*also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right*” (20:4). He foregoes the oral contract for the “*usual daily wage*” that he has established with the first group of labourers, promising instead to pay “whatever is right.” This practice continues throughout the day; the landowner returns at noon, 3:00, and 5:00 and continues to invite more labourers into his vineyard, all of whom depend on the trustworthiness of the landowner to pay them “whatever is right.”

When the workday has ended, the landowner finally turns to his manager and directs him to “*call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.*” (20:8). This is the first of many curious and upsetting actions on the part of the landowner:

- “He stipulates that those hired last will be paid first. Why? This arrangement serves no evident purpose but to make his gesture of ‘equality’ evident to those who worked all day. If the goal is really to create equality among the workers, the landowner could do so without making a public display. Apparently he intends to provoke a reaction.” – Stanley Saunders.

Following the landowner’s instructions, those hired at 5:00 who had worked only one hour come forward first to receive their pay, discovering what the landowner meant when he promised to pay them “whatever is right.” To their surprise – as well as that of all the workers – “*each of them received the usual daily wage*” (20:9), exactly what the group who has worked all day had been promised. At this point, we can almost see all of the other labourers doing the math in their heads:

if those who worked one hour received a denarius, then those of us who worked three hours will receive three denarii, six hours six denarii, and twelve hours twelve denarii. There is eager anticipation as each group waits for what they expect will be a large payday. But to their surprise and disappointment, “*when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage*” (20:10). We can almost hear the cries that echoed throughout my childhood neighbourhood screaming out “*that’s not fair!*”; Matthew reports that “*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*” (20:11-12). They object not to what they have received, but that others who have not worked as hard as them have unfairly been made their equals. Even though no law has been broken nor any principle of justice has been violated, since the landowner has met his contractual obligations with them, they are infuriated because their work should have received a greater reward than those who had laboured far fewer hours in the vineyard. They had received what they had been promised at the beginning of the day but seeing the same amount of money in every workers’ hands was not right: “*That’s not fair!*”

The parable takes an even more curious turn when the landowner responds to their grumbling: “*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?*” (20:13-15). Addressing a person as “friend” in Jesus’ day does not carry the warm connotations it does today; it was an address to someone who relationship had become alienated and distanced from the speaker. In Matthew, “friend” is constantly employed ironically; in Matthew 22:12 a king uses it to address a man he is about to have bound hand and foot and booted into outer darkness, because he had come improperly dressed to the wedding feast (“*Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?*”). Jesus himself calls Judas “friend” as he come to betray Jesus at Gethsemane (“*Friend, do what you are here to do.*” – 26:50). The landowner addresses his disgruntled workers not as close acquaintances but as those who have placed themselves in an adversarial relationship with one they perceive to be unfair. His first question challenges their implied accusation that they have been treated unfairly; after all, he paid them exactly what they had agreed upon when they were hired. The landowner’s decision on what he would pay his workers was a matter of his own choosing: “*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?*” He had promised those what had been hired throughout the day that they would be paid “whatever is right” – and to him, what is right meant that all would be paid the same wage. But it is the landowner’s final question that cuts to the heart of the matter: “*are you envious because I am generous?*” (literally “*is your eye evil because I am good?*”). “Evil eye” was a Semitic idiom that describes someone who is envious, grudging, or culpably lacking in generosity:

- “Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and therefore view your needy neighbour with hostility and give nothing; your neighbour might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.” – Deuteronomy 15:9.
- “The miser is an evil person; he turns away and disregards people. The eye of the greedy person is not satisfied with his share; greedy injustice withers his soul.” – Sirach 14:8-9.

The injustice lies not with the landowner but with the grumbling labourers who have become envious of the others. Envy is not simply jealousy, which is the desire to attain or possess what another person has. Envy is the sin of being upset by another person's good fortune, something that Scripture traces back to the devil himself: "... *for God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it*" (Wisdom of Solomon 2:23-24). Jesus' parable "conveys a theological message about God's goodness as well as a moral message that cautions readers against envy" (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). Envy is among the "works of the flesh" about which Paul warns his readers in Galatians:

- "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh ... Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." – Galatians 5:16, 19-21.

Paul teaches his Corinthian readers that the love of God (*agape*) that is the "still more excellent way" for them to live together has no room for such envious behaviour:

- "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." – 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

In the kingdom of heaven to which this parable is compared, there is no room for envy over what someone else has received, because the heavenly kingdom is rooted in God's sovereign reign where what God chooses is based on God's sovereignty as a good and gracious God, the One with whom there can be no bargaining because he is the Creator and the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth:

- "What they are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says in Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion' [Exodus 33:19]. So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth' [Exodus 9:16]. So then he has mercy on whomsoever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomsoever he chooses." – Romans 9:14-18.

There is an element of unfairness in this parable because the Gospel which our Lord Jesus Christ proclaims is not based on fairness but on **grace**, on God's free and unconditional love that God showers freely upon everyone. As God "*makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*" (Matthew 5:45), so does God choose to be gracious and generous to all people, to those who have been faithful all of their lives as well as those who have come to the Lord in their final hour. The Gospel is good news because it is rooted in "*grace [that] is always amazing grace. Grace that can be calculated and expected is no longer grace.*" (M. Eugene Boring). The Gospel that is rooted in this gracious love of God is one in which "*all merit*

is reduced to nothing and God's mercy alone is praised, and it is firmly decreed that 'the last shall be first and the first last.' In saying, 'The first shall be last,' he takes away all your pride. But in saying, 'The last shall be first,' he takes from you all despair." (Martin Luther).

I can't remember if we ever studied this parable in Sunday School, but if we did I'm sure that we would have raised the same objections that we had voiced countless times in our childhood arguments: "*That's not fair!*" And we would have been correct, because this parable is not rooted in our concepts of what is just and fair but in the foundational principle of the Kingdom of God in which we are reconciled to God and to one another by grace, which teaches us that "*there is nothing we can do to make God love us less, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us more*" (Philip Yancey). It is the message that "*by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Those who are born anew to a living hope through Christ's death and resurrection are not to grumble about what we perceive to be the "*unfair*" disposal of grace upon another person, but to rejoice in God fulfilling God's gracious promises to us. The kingdom of God is the kingdom of grace; "*it is far greater and more beautiful than the heaven you can see, and in addition it is certain, imperishable, and eternal.*" (Luther).

That's not fair – that's grace! It's the grace that loves us unconditionally, that abides with us eternally, and that blesses us with hope that never perishes. It is the message of blessed hope that assures us that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit abides with us always. Grace goes far beyond fairness because God has chosen to bless us with the fullness of God's grace "*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit of worthiness of mine at all!*" (Small Catechism). Grace is God's gift for you, for me, for everyone. This is God's Will for all God's children, so that all may lift our voices together in thanks and praise for this amazing grace that is for you, for me – for everyone!

Amen.