

Pentecost 16A September 20 2020
Matthew 20:1-16
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

"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." Let's pray:

History is littered with many versions and experiences of this parable and the stories are all too familiar to us. We know people who, in our not so humble opinion, neither earned nor deserved what they got; a great job, a promotion, a pay rise, recognition, happiness, wealth, success. We worked harder, longer, and more productively and yet, it seems, it didn't count for much. From birth, we are trained to view the world through the lens of fairness rather than grace, the exact opposite of God's view of the world.

We've been taught from an early age that fairness matters. If you watch children playing together, you won't have to wait long to hear, "That's not fair!" It was never fair when the older boys in my neighbourhood used to pummel us little fellas in backyard rugby league. It was never fair that my cousin used to receive all the adulation because he was a better athlete. It was never fair that the rich kids got to go to Disneyland for a holiday and I couldn't. That I still remember these things suggests how deeply ingrained within us the idea of fairness is.

And it's not just children. Adults want fairness too. The problem is that fairness, rather than love, acceptance, mercy, forgiveness, or generosity is the measure by which we judge others.

I think we're attracted to fairness, because it assures us of order, predictability, control, and hierarchy; even if it's a false assumption. Fairness is based on what you deserve, how hard you work, what you achieve, the way in which you behave. Sometimes it's fair to give a reward, other times a punishment. The society we live in promotes a wage-based society in which you earn what you get and get what you deserve. You deserve the consequences of your actions, good or bad.

Then, along comes Jesus to throw a spanner in the works. What happens when divine grace trumps human fairness? We get today's parable. Today's parable suggests that wages and grace are polar opposites. They're opposing worldviews. Your view of the level of fairness in today's gospel determines how much of your life and worldview is wage-based. A wage-based worldview allows little room for grace. A wage-based worldview allows no hope for the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43).

Grace, on the other hand, is dangerous and seditious. It reverses business as usual. "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." That's not how a wage-based society works. The world says the last are last and the first are first because they deserve it. It's what's fair. Our understanding of fairness, however, seems to have little priority in the kingdom of heaven where grace is the rule, not the exception. Grace looks beyond productivity, appearance, effort, dress, ethnicity, achievement, and failure. Grace recognises there is more to you and who you are than what you have done or left undone.

Wages reveal human effort. Grace reveals the goodness of God. Wages make distinctions and divide. Grace seeks unity and inclusion. Wages are based on merit and require effort. Grace just happens. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift [grace] of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). The only precondition of grace is that we show up and open ourselves to receive what God is giving freely and abundantly. When we do, we see things differently.

For example, let's consider why creatively gifted thinkers struggle in our education system. John Taylor Gatto quotes, "When you take the free will out of education, that turns it into schooling." Sadly, our education system does a great job of marginalising creative-minded people. If your child doesn't fit into a system that's designed for linear thinkers, they don't win end-of-year prizes — only 'could do better' report card comments.

Most education systems are heavily bureaucratic. And bureaucracies don't think outside of the box and let random ideas run loose. Creativity involves trial and error which is unacceptable in organisations that play it safe by relying on structure and statistics to prove progress.

This is where the problem lays. Straight-jacketing creative minds doesn't lead to innovation, and innovation is what creates the jobs for people to work in. And I've said nothing yet of those who strive to make the world a more beautiful place through music, drama, dancing, writing, and art. How do we place a value on beauty and creativity?

I can name a number of things that have stopped me dead in my tracks because of their surreal beauty and creativity: the first time I really noticed my wife at teacher's college; the time I was blown away by the opening scene of the *Phantom of the Opera*; the first time I laid eyes on *The Immaculate Conception* painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo; the first time I heard Johann Pachelbel's *Canon in D Major* played by the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields. Simply breathtaking events gifted to [some would say wasted on] an undeserving scruff like me.

The point of all this is that grace reminds us that we're not nearly as self-sufficient, deserving, or independent as a wage-based society would like us to believe. Neither is our worth determined by our productivity or usefulness to others. Grace doesn't justify or excuse discrimination, unfairness, or oppression. To the contrary it holds

before us the truth that each person is more than their behaviour, their looks, their accomplishments, or their failures.

The tragedy of a wage-based life is that it blinds us to the presence of grace, the life of God, in our own life. It can make us resentful of grace and beauty in the life of others. Eventually we set up standards and expectations not only for ourselves and others, but for God. That's what happened to the first hired in today's parable. They saw themselves as more deserving than the later hired. They grumbled against the landowner saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us." The truth is they're not that different from each other. Neither group owned the vineyard. Both groups needed a job and both groups were invited in, by no effort of their own. There is a distinction, however, between the first hired and the later hired.

The distinction isn't what time they showed up to work. The distinction between the first hired and all the later hired is the terms under which they entered the vineyard. The first hired entered the vineyard only after agreeing to the usual daily wage. The later hired agreed to receive "whatever is right." At the end of the day, they were paid a full day's wage for less than a full day's work. "That's not fair," we might say. No, it's not fair; it's grace.

The first hired got what they bargained for. The later hired workers didn't. They entered the vineyard accepting they would be paid "whatever is right." Whatever is right is not determined by the first hired or by a wage-based society but by the goodness of the landowner. These later hired workers received more than they earned, more than they deserved, more than they had a right to ask or hope for. That's just what God does. "Whatever is right" isn't about fairness but about grace.

Why settle for the usual daily wage when God wants to give you "whatever is right" for your life - your salvation? "Whatever is right" will always be more than fair, more than we could ask or imagine.

Grace moves us beyond a wage-based existence into the vineyard of eternal life. This is the life God wants to give you. This is the life Jesus gave up for you.

Grace emerges when we stop comparing ourselves and lives to others. Grace emerges when we refuse to compete in such a way that someone must lose for us to win. Grace emerges when we trust that in God's world there is enough for everyone. Grace emerges when we let go of expectations based on what we think we or others deserve. Grace emerges when we stop judging ourselves and others. There is hope in trusting that God pays "whatever is right" knowing that his ways are not our ways. His way is the way of grace.

Imagine a world uninhibited by comparison, competition, expectation, and judgement. Our lives will be God-filled, we'll make room for the life of others to be God-filled, and the world will, as the parable tells us, look a lot like the kingdom of heaven. Grace to you in the name of Jesus. Amen.

And the grace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.