

Rev. Matthew Verseemann
Trinity Lutheran Church
Decatur, Illinois
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“It’s Just Not Fair – But It Is Gracious”

Hear the Word of God from Matthew 20, and the parable of the vineyard,

Jesus said, “Are you envious because I’m generous.”

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST,

The kingdom of heaven isn’t fair. And that’s good because grace isn’t fair. Fair is the law; grace is the Gospel. If it’s fair, it’s not good news, because if it’s law, then it’s all up to you. If it’s fair, the first come in first, the last come in last; survival goes to the fittest; the race to the swiftest, and the kingdom of heaven to those who achieve it. There’s just one snag, you’ve got to be perfect to achieve it. But if it’s by grace, then it’s all gift, and receiving heaven doesn’t depend on your performance. If it’s by grace then the first are last, the last are first, and the deathbed convert is justified in the same way as the lifelong Christian. You and I don’t need a God Who’s fair, we need a God who’s gracious. But I’m getting ahead of myself. So let’s go the parable.

A man had a vineyard and needed workers. So he goes to the union hall at 6 AM and negotiated with the union boss for some laborers at a denarius a day – which was about \$120 for a day’s work - and off they went. At 9 AM, he noticed he was still shorthanded, and so he went to the Home Depot and found some idlers standing around doing nothing, so he said, ‘Come and work for me and I’ll pay you whatever is just.’ He uses the word ‘Just’. Not fair. The same word in ‘justified’. Remember that.

Then he did the exact same thing at Noon and at 3 PM. He found some idlers hanging around the bowling alley, and hired them for an unspecified just wage, and they agreed. At 5 o’clock he saw that the sun was setting, there was still work to do, and he needed more help. So he goes to the local bar where he finds...tattoos, spiked leather, body piercings, mousse holding up spiked blue hair, music blaring loud enough to reprogram your pace-maker at 200 yards. He turns the volume down on the boom box and says, ‘Any of you need a little extra cash?’ Nobody seems interested. So he says, ‘Look, I’m rich and I pay well.’ So they figure, ‘What the heck. It’s only an hour. We’re running low on beer money. So why not? How hard can it be anyway?’ And off they go. Page 1

Finally, Six PM hits, and it's Miller Time, as they say. So the workers head to the foreman with the money. And the vineyard owner says, 'Let's have a little fun with this.' So he has the workers line up in reverse order, from the last hires to the first, from the 11th hour losers to the first hour union boys who agreed to work for a denarius a day. So when the 11th hour workers opened their pay envelope they find six, crisp \$20 bills – a full day's pay for only one hour of work. Wow! What a deal! But the truth is, there was no deal. There wasn't even any promise of their being paid. He could have paid them nothing. Or he could have paid a twelfth of a day's wage. That would have been fair. But they received a whole denarius, and they hustle off to start enjoying it.

At this, the word starts to trickle down the line. So what do you suppose the rest of the workers are thinking? Probably something like this: "The Vineyard Owner is paying a denarius an hour!" So the twelve hour union boys, at the end of the line are all giddy and rubbing their hands together. At this rate, they think they're going to get twelve denarii, or twelve days pay, for one day's work. What a deal! But remember, the vineyard owner had already made a deal with them: one denarius for a day's work. And as the line gets shorter, their faces get longer, and reality sets in: everyone is getting paid a denarius.

So who's the happiest, and who's the least happy? Of course, the happiest are the 11th hour hires. No promises of pay was made to them at all, for their measly hour of work. And yet they got a whole day's wages, a bright shiny denarius. The third, sixth, and ninth hour workers don't have too much to complain about. All the owner promised was to pay them "what was just." And in his justice, that was a day's wages, for less than a full day's work. So they were probably pretty happy too, so long as they didn't think too much about those 11th hour deadbeats. But the first hires, the union boys, the ones who had worked the full twelve hours, start to grumble. ***"These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. That's not fair!"*** Yet, they have the least to complain about. They were paid what they agreed to - union scale - a denarius a day.

And then the vineyard owner pops the Gospel cork, and pours a strong one, saying, ***"Friend, Didn't you agree with me for a denarius a day?"*** Take what belongs to you and go. It's my money, and I can do with the rest of it what I please. If I want to give a full day's wage to some 11th hour slackers, simply because I have compassion on them; that's my business. Besides, who said anything about being 'fair'? 'Fair' has to do with bookkeeping, and giving you what you deserve. And I prefer to be gracious, rather than simply fair. What's that to you? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" I like the way the original Greek text puts that last question: ***"Or is your eye evil because I am good?" Do you cast an evil eye on my goodness?"***

One of the toughest pills for “the religious” – who trust in their religiosity - to swallow is the idea that God justifies the ungodly – and we’re all ungodly - not based on our works, achievements or accomplishments, but on the sheer, unfathomable grace of God in Jesus Christ, who doles out a denarius of salvation to everyone alike; whether a life-long Lutheran, or a deathbed convert. The ‘religious’ often turn an evil eye to all this. God may be good, but He’s not supposed to be that good. It’s just not fair: the last being first, the first being last, and everyone receiving the whole kingdom of God. It’s bad enough that people are trying to take competition out of kid’s sports, so that there’s no winners and losers. But imagine a league where the last place team gets the same sized trophy as the undefeated first place team, and they get their trophy first! Yikes!

“A day’s wages for a day’s work”: that’s being fair. That’s what we expect in our world. And that’s well and good for the world to run by the rule of law. In fact, most things in our world are run by the rule of law – what’s fair! It’s almost a mantra with us: ‘Equal pay for equal work’, ‘Equality of the sexes’, ‘Equal protection under the law’, ‘Treat everyone the same’. And that’s the way the law works.

But that has nothing whatsoever to do with God grace in Jesus. When it’s comes to salvation and getting into heaven, God can’t be fair, or there’d be ‘hell to pay’. Isaiah reminds us, “***God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways.***” He deals with us NOT according to what’s fair, but according to His undeserved love.

Romans 6 says, “***The wages of Sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.***” Wages are what you earn. Gifts are given and received freely, unearned, without any merit or worthiness on the part of the recipient. If you want God to be fair, and deal with you according to your works, achievements, accomplishments, and all the things you do, then you’ll be damned; because you haven’t put in a full day’s work until you’ve kept all of God’s commandments perfectly. “HELL” is where “fairness” will get you and me.

To deal in fairness, you have to apply measurements, the way my brother and I did when we always checked to see who got the bigger piece of chocolate cake. Fairness means measurement, and measurement means the law. But God’s gives equal salvation for unequal in the kingdom - a full denarius of salvation, even before we did anything for the Lord.

In our parable, everyone got paid equally. No it wasn’t fair. It was gracious. The manager was “just”, in the sense that the ones who worked all day for an agreed-upon denarius, got precisely what they deserved. Yet, they were also the least joyful, the least grateful, the least aware of the vineyard owner’s goodness, and they were the most whiny, and complaining about fairness. Page 3

That's how it is with those who live under the Law. They are bitter, resentful, always comparing, always measuring, always justifying themselves by how much they've done, and how little everyone else around them has done.

The later workers had no such labor agreement, but fully expected to receive "what was just," whatever that was. But the eleventh hour workers had no reason to expect anything. No wages were even promised. Let's kick the parable up one more notch, shall we? What if the vineyard owner went out into the streets and alleys after he had paid his workers their denarius apiece, and gave everyone he met a denarius for no work at all. Now that would have been pure, unadulterated, 24-karat grace!

Do you rejoice that Jesus forgives people as easily as He does, or does it tick you off, because you think He should only die for card-carrying 'good people'? The reality is: there are none. Jesus came to die for this whole miserable, dying world – lock, stock, and wine barrel: for first hour vineyard workers in the wee early hours of their baby baptism, to the 11th hour deathbed converts.

((In fact, in one sense we're all 11th hour converts? Others believe long before us. Others suffered for Christ long before us, and much more than we have. There have been workers in the Vineyard for nearly 2000 years now; who bore the heat of persecution, who defended the faith, and who suffered a lot to pass Jesus onto you and me. Before we think others don't deserve grace but we do we should realize that we're living in the 11th hour of this dying world, with the sun setting quickly, and the fields ripe for harvest. Still, the Lord of the harvest loved us so much, He called us to live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in His vineyard in the 11th hour of this old world. Even if you and I are life-long Lutherans, we came into the vineyard when the bulk of the work was already done. Yet, we receive the same denarius of salvation in Jesus as all those who have gone before us. In fact, if we'll push the parable just a bit harder, we'll realize that there was already an envelope with our name on it, filled with salvation, even before we showed up for work, and even serving in God's vineyard is God's gift to us.))

And that, my friends, is the kind of Savior we've got. Romans 5, '***While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***' While we were still ungodly, He justified us. Before we so much as lifted a finger to work in His vineyard, He already tucked a denarius of salvation in our pockets. If the truth be told, only Jesus labored the full twelve hours under the heat of the Law's sun, and God's judgment. And at the close of the day, He put a denarius of righteousness and salvation that He earned, into everyone's account. And though it wasn't 'fair', it was love. It was not 'equal protection under the Law', in fact, it's not Law at all. It's what we call the Gospel: the Good news, the Happy News, Grace, undeserved love, Gift given and received, not wages earned. Page 4

The “religious” are often deeply offended by how freely Jesus forgives – you’re not supposed to forgive people that easily; as well as by how quickly God welcomes sinners. He’s like a crazy vineyard owner who pays his last workers the same as the first. Better still, he gives us all a denarius of salvation, even before we’ve done any work in His vineyard. It’s a “crazy good” kingdom, where the last are first, the first are last, and in the end, everyone gets the same death and resurrection, the same cleansing Baptism, the same forgiving Body and Blood of Jesus; the same heaven and the same entire kingdom of God, all by grace, through faith, for Jesus’ sake. Outrageous? You bet it is! It’s outrageously good! Don’t spoil the “happy hour” of salvation by grumbling about God being too generous with His love in Christ, or by “keeping books” on ourselves and others. There’s no joy in serving if you’re worried about what the other guy is making. And there’s no joy in rising from the dead to live forever in paradise, if we keep that grace for ourselves, and deny it to others. The Good News is: Jesus went ahead and forgave everyone on the cross, even before we asked Him too. This is how easily Jesus forgives sinners. So when another 11th hour convert comes to faith, let’s welcome them to the party, and laugh with them, all the way to heaven: that this is how incredibly good our Savior is! Amen.