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Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 24, 2023

Fairness and Grace

Is God fair? It's an old question and people have been asking it for centuries. Why do the good die young? Why do the wicked get rich? Why are the innocent punished? As God guides and governs his people, he often seems unfair. Jesus' parable in today's Gospel illustrates the truth that God is unfair: He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve but provides the gifts we don't deserve. God rewards us by grace alone.

Sermon

Matthew 20:1-16

(the sermon text is embedded in the sermon below)

Stay with Grace

Introduction - If the landowner in Jesus' parable owned a business in Milwaukee, he would be denounced in the media and taken to court by the Labor Relations Board. If the landowner in the parable coached the football team Homestead High School, a whole lot of parents would work to get him fired. If the landowner were the CEO of the Ford Motor Company, the United Auto Workers would go on strike.

So you know the story: This landowner **went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.** No problem with that. But he needed more workers, so he went again at 9:00 and at noon and at 3:00 and at 5:00 and hired more workers. He wanted to get the job done before 6:00. A wise man. **When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.** Nothing wrong with that. **The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. OK. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.** Now we have a problem. **When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.** Come on; this isn't right; this isn't fair. **These who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.** I get this; I understand why they were upset. This isn't the way it works in the business world, not in our country. American labor is about level playing fields and equal pay for equal work. It's only fair.

Jesus told this parable because his disciples were feeling the same frustration and confusion as the workers in the vineyard. Jesus had just made the point that life with God is impossible without God

getting involved and that people can't be saved from sin by doing the right things. So the disciples were getting a little defensive. OK, Jesus, we get this. But does this really apply to us? Peter was saying what the others were thinking: **We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?** So what are we, Jesus? Chopped liver?

Silly disciples, right? Every good Lutheran knows that God gives eternal life by grace and not by works. **It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.** We read that in the Bible, we learned it in Sunday School, we hear it in sermons and sing about it in hymns. By grace alone. It's just so simple.

But I wonder how simple it really is. I'm not so sure it's all that simple at all, especially for us Americans. Turn on any news channel, read any newspaper, go to any union meeting, listen to any politician, and you and I are bombarded by the American way: Equal pay for equal work...you get what you pay for...fair is fair. The truth is that the way we Americans live and work in our society is the exact opposite of how God works in the kingdom of heaven. But you know what? It's amazing how often the American way intrudes into our life with God.

Situation 1: I know that all people are the same to God, but if we're going to be honest about this, isn't it true that some people are more valuable to God than others? My grandmother was a Christian all her life and she was an absolute saint. She never missed church and never missed working at a church potluck. And I'm not gonna brag, but I go to church all the time and volunteer when I can and give pretty generously. I get the religious angle of this, but listen—and I'm serious here: don't better workers deserve better pay? Doesn't faithfulness count for something?

Situation 2: When I would come home college, my mother would say, "You better go to communion today; you haven't gone in a while." Like going to communion was my obligation, something on a list I could check off. Go to church; check. Go to Bible class; check. Get my babies baptized; check. Put money in my offering envelopes; check. Love my wife and kids; check. Talk to my friends about Jesus; check. We all know it; we should really do this stuff. It's our duty.

Situation 3: The place where I worked for 20 years closes its doors. The doctor tells me I have cancer. I don't get the job I was sure I had. Why me, Lord? What did I do wrong? Why are you punishing me? Why do I have to suffer? Why do they have it good and I have it bad?

Situation 4: I know about preaching the gospel to all nations, but I have to be honest. After what happened in the Vietnam war, I can't give money to WELS for a seminary in Saigon. Seems to me WELS needs more Americans who are young, smart, and rich. Mission work in third world countries isn't going to keep the synod alive.

So you see what happens. In my head I can say "by grace alone" but in my heart I have trouble sometimes. The American way sneaks into my life with God. Why doesn't God reward those who deserve to be rewarded? Why can't God bless the good people? Why can't God be fair? Why can't God be fair with me?

The truth is God does reward those who deserve to be rewarded. God is fair; he is absolutely fair. He has to be fair; he's God. So he set up the contract: You live according to my commands and obey them perfectly and I'll give you eternal life. Equal pay for equal work. And right here is the problem with equal pay for equal work in the kingdom of heaven. None of us has carried out the contract. You

haven't and I haven't, not by a long shot. And neither has anyone else. When God goes to honor those who deserve to be honored, there's no one to honor. When God is fair, nobody gets anything; everybody is lost. If you want God to be fair to you, then be prepared to go in hell because that's what's going to happen, and that would be fair.

God decided a long time ago that fair wasn't the way he wanted to do business. He came up with another plan. He sent Jesus down here to our world to handle the contract. Jesus did the work the contract demanded and Jesus paid the penalty when the contract was breached. Without Jesus we could never work hard enough or long enough to gain eternal life. With Jesus we don't have to work at all. God does not reward us because of what we do. He gives us eternal life because of Jesus. That's called GRACE. God forgives us for one reason and one reason only: He loves us even though we don't deserve it.

When the workers complained in the parable, this is what the landowner said: **I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?** For whatever reason, this landowner simply decided to pay everyone the same. We don't know why and it's not important. This is important. God gives us eternal life by grace alone. He does this because he needs to, for without grace we would all die. He does because he can, for Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. He does this because he wants to, for grace is at the bottom of God's heart. God loves us because he loves us. And he loves everyone the same. Believe that and you will live forever.

Go and sue as many businesses as you like, work to replace the coach who plays the wrong players, vote for the politicians who promote your idea of fairness and go on strike if you need to. You have that right as Americans. But keep all that stuff out from the secular world out of your life with God. Here's the message for today: **STAY WITH GRACE.** If you **stay with grace** your status with God is always going to be the same whether you're faithful or unfaithful. God will see your long hours of service and love you in grace, and God will see your sinful disasters and will still love you in grace. If you **stay with grace**, working for God actually becomes fun because grace takes away all the obligations. You're done with the shoulds of Christian living; with grace you wish you could do more--and a lot of times God lets you. If you **stay with grace**, sickness and trouble seem different. You spend a lot less time worrying about what ails you and a lot more time anticipating what awaits you. If you **stay with grace**, your love for grace becomes so strong that you can't endure the thought of others being without it. Stay with grace and you're filled with passion to take grace to everyone. Amen.