



“It’s Not Fair!”

14th Sunday after Pentecost - September 18, 2011

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

*Bless this word proclaimed, and we who hear it O Lord,
that we may know your mercy better. Amen.*

There are times a text from a hymn sung years and years before becomes ingrained in memory. This text can be from a camp or worship experience; it can even be connected to particular scripture.

This morning is one of those times. For whatever reason, whenever I hear or read this passage from Matthew, the words to the hymn, “Hark The Voice of Jesus Calling” come to mind. I first heard this hymn while in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Even though it has been almost twenty years since leaving the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and becoming part of the ELCA, the text has remained with me. The text, to the first verse is:

“Hark, the voice of Jesus calling, “Who will go and work today? Fields are white and harvests waiting, Who will bear the sheaves away?” Loud and long the master calls you; Rich reward he offers free. Who will answer gladly saying, “Here am I. Send me, send me?” (LBW, 381)

In this verse, I can picture the vineyard owner walking up and down the streets asking people if they are interested in working for a day’s wage. Perhaps down on their luck, and thinking any work is better than no work at all, I can picture the workers willingly saying, “Pick me! I’ll come work for you.”

Throughout this verse, and in the rest of the verses of this hymn, I can hear the progression of the day. The vineyard owner goes out to the streets at least three more times during the course of the day. Each time the owner goes out, he asks the same question, “who will go and work today?” Each time, I can also picture workers with time on their hands, nothing to do, looking for work responding with similar words of “I’ll come work for you.”

The hymn continues,

*Let none hear you idly saying, there is nothing I can do,” While the multitudes are dying
And the Master calls for you. Take the task he gives you gladly; Let his work your pleasure be.
Answer quickly when he calls you, “here am I, send me, send me.” (verse 4)*

In these words, I hear , the workers who thought to themselves that they did not have the necessary skills, or perhaps that there would not be enough work for them to do. Some of the workers may have even thought the vineyard owner was not authentic. Matthew does not record this, but there may have been some of the workers who thought the vineyard owner’s offer was far too good to be true – and so they waited.

Why they waited, no one knows. Maybe they were hoping for another, better offer. Maybe they waited to see how serious the vineyard owner was about employing them for a day's wage. Maybe, they decided to follow the vineyard owner because they had grown tired of his requests for workers.

The reasons the workers waited until the last minute to work for the vineyard owner are up to speculation. The Bible is filled with accounts that leave us wondering what happened, or why events happened a particular way. The Bible does not always answer these questions, but instead leaves room for us to place ourselves in the story. By doing that, we are then able to answer the questions of how and where we see ourselves in the story.

Most of us would probably see ourselves as the workers who went to work at the beginning of the day. We are ready to do the work needing to be done. We are willing to roll up our sleeves and make the most out of the day. After all, there are bills to pay, and mouths to feed. Better to work than to do nothing.

Some of us may see ourselves as the workers who went to work at other times of the day. It is a win-win situation: there is work needing to be done, and we need something to do. We are willing to complete a project and help wherever we are needed, even if we are paid a little.

Some of us may think we have nothing to share with the work needing to be done. The skills that are needed are perhaps not the things we either enjoy doing, or the skills we know we are not good at doing. So we stand by idly, saying to anyone who will listen, "there is nothing I can do."

Still others of us are those who arrive to work near the end of the day. Tired of standing around doing nothing, we may figure some work is better than no work, even for an hour or two. We may figure that working and receiving even a small amount of pay is better than no pay at all.

But let us take this perspective one step further. How would we feel, think, act, if we were indeed those who asked to be the first working in the vineyard at the end of the day? We would be tired, no doubt. We would probably also be like those in Matthew's Gospel who protest that the wage received is not fair.

We learn from an early age what is fair and what is not: be nice to others; share your possessions with others; treat others with kindness. These lessons stay with us for a very long time. As they stay with us, these lessons about fairness repeatedly become challenged. Having someone get to the gas pump at the same time we are trying to make sure we are on the same side of the pump as our tank can leave us saying, "it's not fair!" Watching a long anticipated promotion going to someone we think is less qualified than us can leave us thinking life is not fair. We may watch the evening news over the next few days and begin to hear stories of people recovering from flooding, trying to receive financial assistance, only to hear news their house did not lie in a one hundred year flood plain. As we begin to hear these stories, we may also find ourselves thinking this little "catch" also seems unfair to those who have already been through so

much. A child may think it unfair when they are told to share a toy or a dessert with a sibling when one had it first.

Life can be unfair. Sadly, we carry this thought of what is fair and what is not into our faith. Like the workers in Matthew who were hired first and who expected to be paid more for their efforts and labor, we too may find ourselves bemoaning, “that’s not fair!” when we think or see God’s grace extended to those we think do not deserve it.

But consider – those hired last who received the same wages as those hired first. Rather than grumble about what they were paid, or even grumble about how unfair it was that they were paid the same amount as those who began hours before them, they rejoiced! They were glad! Because what they received was more – **MORE** than what had been anticipated or expected. Given the time of day the vineyard owner went to find workers, those hired near the end of the day may have thought their payment would be for the work they had done. An hour’s worth of work is better than none. Consider the worker’s surprise hired fifteen minutes before the day is done – she too receives a full day’s wage!!

And that – that is the beauty and tension of our lessons for today. We want to experience God’s mercy and grace in our lives. At the same time, we want *others* to experience God’s grace and mercy on *our* terms instead of God’s. We think others deserve less of God’s grace than we ourselves do. And, there are others who think we too deserve less of God’s grace.

In our minds, the thought of someone receiving more of God’s grace leaves us jealous. It leaves us jealous because we may find ourselves comparing ourselves to someone else. When we compare, or when we become envious of what we think others have, we fail to see the abundant blessings God has given to each of us. We fail to see in these blessings, the never ending grace and mercy of God in our lives, and the reality God’s grace is equally--and freely given to all.

One of the sayings I have learned over the years is a two part saying that can be reversed. I first heard it while Vaughn was serving a United Methodist Church in Harrisburg, and then again while in seminary. The first part of the saying is “God is good.” The second part of the saying is “All the time.” When I say, “God is good”, your response is “all the time.”

The reverse of the sayings are also true. “All the time.” “God is good.” The saying is a needed reminder that God’s mercy, God’s blessings and God’s grace are indeed good – all the time. Whether first, last, or somewhere in between, God’s grace and mercy is good – all the time.

Thanks be to God!

Amen!