

UNFAIR GRACE!
14th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. S. D. Spencer - Pastor Messiah Lutheran Church

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 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.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last."

Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN!

As I look around this room I see people that are fair minded. That means you might not like this parable. But you've been warned. This isn't going to be one of those sermons you want to send off to the relatives. This one's kind of embarrassing. Best keep it "just between us" so to speak. You, like those in this parable, along with the rest of the world, believe in fairness. An honest day's wages for an honest day's work, you reap what you sow. Those are the rules. We despise the slackers, those who don't put in their fair share. We expect God to play by those rules as well. We expect God to take notice of our blood, sweat, and tears. We expect God to run His Church much like an American Express card where there's a little statement down in the corner - "member since 1968."

But God's ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not our thoughts, as Isaiah reminds us this morning, and nothing says it clearer than this parable. It comes on the heels of one of those upside-down kingdom statements from Jesus. ***The first will be last, and the last will be first.*** That's not our way of thinking is it? It's not the way a race is ordinarily run? It doesn't seem fair, but then God isn't fair. He's just, He's gracious, and He's good, anything but fair!

A vineyard owner went out to hire workers for his vineyard. He has a vineyard packed full of grapes. And like all those fine grapes at the end of September from the Willamette Valley, their sugar is perfect, their flavor at its peak, the yeast ready for action. It's picking time.

So the owner gets in his pickup at the crack of dawn and goes down to the local union hall and hires every available worker at union scale. A denarius a day that's about \$120 in today's dollars. And off they go to work in the vineyards.

He looks out over his fields and notices that the workers are barely making a dent in the Pinot Noir, much less the Zinfandel and Merlot. So about nine in morning he heads over to the Home Depot where day laborers are, and hires them for "whatever is just," (he doesn't say how much that is) and off they go to work in the vineyard.

Dark clouds looming overhead. It looks like rain is on the way. And the Riesling really needs to be picked before the rain hits. So the vineyard owner goes out again at noon and three, picking up whatever workers he can find.

Still, not enough! It's almost five o'clock, the sun is sinking, and there are still grapes on the vine. He's hired just about every worker in town, so he goes over to a local bar where he finds... tattoos, leather, pierced body parts, spiked blue hair, drug skinny and beer fat workers listening to music with the bass loud

enough to reprogram a pacemaker at 200 yards. He turns the volume down on the offending boom box, and says, "Why aren't you working?" And one of them says, "Duh. It's 'cause there's no work to be had, dude." Little wonder why they haven't been hired!

He looks at his watch, looks up at the setting sun and the gathering clouds, lets out a long sigh, and says, "Look, I'm rich. I'm famous. I pay. I need workers; you need work. It'll only be for an hour are you willing to work? And they figure, hey it's only an hour, and a few bucks will buy some beer, so why not?" And off they go to work in the vineyard.

At six o'clock, the bell tolls, and the fun begins. The grapes are in the hopper, and our vineyard owner is one happy winemaker. He's feeling good, and says to his foreman, "Let's have a little fun. I'm going to fill the pay envelopes myself. And when you hand them out to the workers, let's do it LIFO, as book keepers say - last in, first out.

The first in line is one of those eleventh hour workers, hired at the last minute, who barely broke a sweat much less raised a blister. He opens his pay envelope and finds six crisp twenties and hustles off as quickly as possible, but not before word trickles down the line. So what do you suppose the rest of the workers in line are thinking? They're thinking, \$120 an hour, that's what they're thinking. And so one by one they step up, rubbing their hands together, expecting the biggest payday of their grape-picking lives.

But in all their figuring, they hadn't figured on one thing. In this vineyard pay is based on the owner's goodness, not on the workers merit. And in his goodness, he hands out a denarius to everyone, regardless of how much or how little they worked, whether they worked twelve hours or a single hour, whether they picked a hundred bushels or a single cluster.

You can imagine that as the line of workers gets shorter, the faces get longer. "Not fair," say the sweatiest and most exhausted. We've knocked ourselves out in the heat for the whole day, and these deadbeats worked less than an hour. It just isn't fair!

But our vineyard owner won't hear any of it. "Look pal," he says. "A denarius a day is what we agreed on, and a denarius a day is what you got. So what's the gripe? If I want to give a full day's wages to some eleventh-hour slacker that's my business, not yours. And who said anything about fair? Fair has to do with bookkeeping and spread sheets. I'm a winemaker not a bean counter, and I prefer to be good rather than fair. Crazy good. Be glad you're working. Or are you so busy keeping book on everyone else that you wish to resent my crazy goodness? We're opening some very nice Pinot over in my tasting room, so why don't you just go and have a drink on the house. And remember, the last are first and the first last."

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to die for the world. Not just for the redeemable, respectable, religiously hard-working parts of the world. But for the whole miserable, sinful, dying world - lock, stock, and wine barrel. For first-hour, hard-working laborers and even the eleventh-hour losers. Jesus was going to Jerusalem to close the books of the Law once and for all, to cover humanity's debt with a bailout plan that makes this week's action in Washington look like petty cash.

This parable reminds us that God's goodness is outrageous grace. It irks the hyper religious pietist. It grates on our sense of fairness and how things should be if we were God. It's grace that puts the first last and the last first. It makes winners out of losers and losers out of the winners. John the Baptist, who worshipped Christ from the womb, gets the same salvation as a repentant thief who turns to Jesus at the eleventh hour of his life and says, "**Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.**" The lifer-Lutheran gets the same denarius as the drunk driver who says, "Jesus have mercy on me" as he crashes through the windshield on the way to his death at the eleventh hour, fifty-ninth minute, and fifty-ninth second of his miserable life. The charter member the same benefits as the catechumen.

Nothing irritates the religious of this world more than undeserved kindness. The Commandment-Keepers Union Local 101 files protests and threatens to strike. Unfair! If that's how it is, then why bother to keep the commandments at all, they cry. But then grace wouldn't be grace, would it? It would be back to the drudgery of book keeping - have you done enough? Have you earned your way in? And if the world could have been saved by bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses with his ledger book of the Ten Commandments and we wouldn't need Jesus and his bloody and disgusting cross.

With this parable, Jesus was likely referring to the Israelites and the Gentiles. You recall how hard it was for the Israelites to accept Gentiles into the church. Who did those pagans think they were? They can't just waltz in here; they have to earn their way in! They have to be circumcised. They have to keep the rules of the Torah, those old resentments loom large.

Many of us here today are among those first hour workers. Probably more accurately we are the third, sixth, or ninth hour ones. Baptized as babies, a dozen or so Christmas pageants under our Lutheran belts. We've grown up in the church. There has never been a moment of our conscious life when we didn't know Jesus as our Savior. We've worked in His vineyard our whole lives, literally grown up among the grape vines. And we can easily resent those eleventh hour late-hires, who benefit from everyone else's hard work.

Jesus reminds us that we rob ourselves of the joy of working in our Lord's vineyard, and we spoil the happy hour of salvation by our grumbling, when we live by the Law and insist on keeping books on ourselves and on others. There's no joy in work if we're worried about what the next guy is making or doing. And there's no joy in rising to eternal life if we expect grace for ourselves and deny it to others. Grace is undeserved kindness, unconditional goodness, the justification of the ungodly, and the forgiveness of the sinner. It's not simply good, it's crazy good, it's unfair grace.

Come to think of it, we really aren't even 9th hour workers, are we? Others have believed before us. Others have suffered before us, and much more than we have. St. Paul reminded the Christians at Rome that the Jews came first. We aren't the first to believe in Christ. There have been workers in the vineyard for nearly two thousand years. There were countless, nameless believers who bore the heat of persecution, who defended the faith, who suffered for the name of Jesus.

And now at the eleventh hour of the old creation, with the sun setting and the fields ripe and harvest near, the Lord of the vineyard has been so kind as to call us live under Him in His kingdom, to labor in the vineyard of the saints. What a privilege! When you look at it that way, we are the last. We came on the scene when the bulk of the work was already done. We've had these things handed to us. (Tradition!) And we get the same denarius, the same salvation, the same forgiveness, the same resurrection to life in Jesus. In fact, if we push the parable just a bit harder, we'll recognize that we haven't done a blessed thing to earn our denarius. It was there in an envelope with your name on it long before you ever showed up for work. And even the work you showed up for is God's doing.

And so whether first or last, whether called at the first, the third, sixth, ninth, or even the eleventh hour, whether we have worked hard, or little, or barely at all, there is a denarius of salvation awaiting us. It was won for all by the death of Jesus. Not fair, you say? Take it up with Jesus. But you don't want Him to be fair. You want Him to be like that vineyard owner - you want unfair grace.

For in Jesus you have already received eternal life. For in Him and through Him all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit for Jesus sake and in Jesus name, AMEN and AMEN!

***The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
AMEN!***