

Sermon - Matthew 20:1-16
16th Sunday after Pentecost-A • Sunday, September 20, 2020
Outdoor Worship Service, Mingus Park
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

It's not fair...that's what they said, anyway.

A few years ago, I worked at AT&T. It was a great job, incredibly stressful, but the pay was really, really good. With the job came the best benefits in world. I paid nothing for my medical insurance – no percentage, no copay, nothing – not even for meds. The company paid all of it and even paid 100% of my spouse's medical insurance, too. Who could complain?

Over the years and through the economy's downturns, (who even uses yellow pages anymore?) even a huge company like AT&T seeks to cut expenses when and where they can. That's understandable. They have a company to keep profitable and shareholders to appease.

So, the next time our contracts came up for negotiation, the company proposed that we each pay a portion of our own medical insurance.

That's when the union cried foul...it's not fair!...

Now, I don't mean to be disparaging of unions or of union stewards, but sometimes they don't live in the real world.

That's because at every job I have ever had, I have always had to pay at least half of my medical insurance premiums and I would have had to pay 100% of my spouse's insurance costs. Do any of you have to pay a portion of *your* own medical insurance? That's the real world. But our AT&T union stewards said it wasn't fair!

I think most of us have a strongly developed sense of what's right and what's wrong...a strong sense of fairness... so strong that we actually feel this "rightness" in our gut.

And that's where today's parable comes in. Many people find the message in this parable of Jesus difficult...it's not fair...the workers should be paid for the time they worked.

Let's first put ourselves in the place of the workers who were chosen last. It's likely that they had all but given up hope for work that day and would soon make the long and disappointing trek home. These aren't folks who are trying to make a little extra pocket cash, after all. They are laborers who expect to earn a daily wage – just enough, that is, to support them and their families for one more day. What we now call food insecurity is their norm, and so it's easy to imagine their excitement when they finally get an invitation to work – they won't earn a full

day's wage, but enough, perhaps, to scrape by. That excitement only multiplies when the manager unexpectedly and inexplicably pays them for a full day! I suspect that each of them suddenly felt a mixture of relief, joy, and gratitude as they received their payment.

Now, let's put ourselves in the place of those who had been called to work at the beginning of the day. Grateful for employment, they had labored all day, doing that work on this day as they had so on so many others not because they derive any particular pleasure from their labor simply because they have to put food on the table (an experience, by the way, that is not limited to folks in the first century). At the end of their shift, they line up, as they do every day, to receive their wage. And when word travels down the line that those hired at the end of the day received a full day's wage, their own moment of wonder turns quickly to anticipation as they calculate what that might mean for them. It's a reasonable expectation, don't you think, that if people who had worked only one hour received a full day's wage, then those who worked all day would receive much more? But all that anticipation turns to dust in their mouths when the manager gives them the same payment: a day's wage. This must seem to them so utterly unfair – they have, after all, worked literally ten times longer than those other workers. And so resentment, rather than gratitude, now grabs hold of them. And sensing this, the owner of the vineyard protests that he actually *has* treated them fairly, paying exactly what was contracted, and wonders why they begrudge his generosity to others.

It's all too easy, I think, for us to dismiss these laborers as ungrateful or selfish. But come on – their reaction is almost exactly what most of us would have felt had we been in their shoes. Because what happens to them simply does not add up and so doesn't seem fair. Never mind it's what was contracted – if those who worked an hour received a day's wage, then those who worked so much longer deserve more.

So, even though this is a tough parable, for me, it's actually one of my favorites - and just this past week, I realized why.

It's sort of a Matthew version of Luke's prodigal son....think about it. What does the older son say when the younger son returns and the dad kills the fatted calf? It's not fair...I spent years by your side, I never squandered anything and you never threw a party for me!!! (I worked all day, he worked only an hour!)

It's understandable that those of us who have been in the church our whole lives would feel a twinge of resentment at the father's extravagant welcoming of the prodigal son and at the workers who got a full day's pay for an hour of work... It's human nature..

they should be paid for the time they worked.

But as we talked last week, I don't think it's about counting or about keeping track.

I've been a good, faithful servant of God my whole life, I was baptized, confirmed and married right here. I've taught Sunday School for years, I've never missed a congregational meeting...I accepted Jesus long ago and I'm certain I'll be in heaven after I die. But do you mean someone who has led an corrupt life and never graced the doorstep of a church can confess belief in Jesus on his deathbed?

Again, I don't think God is about counting, keeping track.

God is about unimaginable grace. Grace, by definition, cannot be quantified.

And, according to this parable, we may not like what we see. Because in the end, sheer generosity? Unexplainable, immeasurable generosity? For no reason at all? No way we can get our heads around that. Why? What's so hard? Because while I think even though we *want* to believe in generosity, we can't. I think we have a fundamental discomfort with, even a suspicion of, generosity.

Here's the challenge of this parable. That generosity is not something to be understood. And I think we, humans have an inherent resistance in receiving generosity because our human nature is to assume that we did something to deserve this generosity. Because?...nothing in life is free. We don't even know how to respond to true generosity. "Really? Me? Why? For no reason? Are you sure? What did I do? "

This parable is a reminder of the absolute gift of generosity that does not demand a response. Any response. Because then generosity is not generous. By definition, generosity is not measurable, accountable, or calculable. That's the point of this parable. God's unearned, unmerited gift of grace is extravagantly generous.

And, when God's favor is extended towards those of whom we disapprove—well, it's time to grow up and begin looking at the world the way that God looks at the world. What **MUST** it be like to look around at the whole wide world and see nothing but your children, who are the apple of your eye, and for whom you'd give everything and anything...even the life of your Son?

Grace and generosity...They are God's gifts to give as God desires... And, you know, God **does** have favorites But, the trick is remembering that each of us is God's very favorite. And so when God pours out love and favor towards someone else, we need not worry. If we'd just take the time to look, we'd see that God has filled our cup to the brim too. In fact, it's overflowing. Amen.