

Text: Matthew 20:1-16 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. **October 12, 2014.**

God's grace is yours through Jesus. Amen.

"It's not fair." It's not fair. He got a bigger piece of pie than I did. It's not his turn to be in front of the line. I'm going to be angry forever. It's not fair. Let's not be too harsh on the children. Don't adults say the same thing? Everyone else was speeding. I'm just the one who got caught. It's not fair. I work harder than everyone else, but he got the promotion. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair.

Jesus told us a parable, that's an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus told us a parable and the main point is, "It's not fair." It's not fair that God loves us so much. It's not fair that God loves us at all. It's not fair that God gives us heaven. It's really not fair. That's God's grace. God's grace is his love that doesn't give us what we deserve, punishment. God's grace is his love that gives us what we don't deserve, heaven, eternal life, love. Let me say that again. God's grace doesn't give us what we deserve. God's grace gives us what we don't deserve. God's grace isn't fair.

This parable illustrates God's grace. Remember that every detail is here to point to God's grace. Let's cover a couple of the details first. Maybe you wondered, "What the heck is a denarius?" A denarius was the common wage for one day's work. Maybe people then said, "Another day, another denarius." At least if it was a good day. Many people, like those in this parable, were day laborers. They went to a public place, like a town square, and stood there and waited for someone to hire them. If they got hired, they got a denarius for the day. If they didn't get hired, they might go hungry. So they were happy to accept any work anyone would offer them. Those guys who got hired early in the morning were happy to say, "Another day, another denarius." They gladly agreed to work for the day. Keep in mind, they agreed to work the day for the denarius.

Let's look at the landowner. He's really the key guy in this story. Consider his grace. He had done a lot of work before he could even enter the market and hire these workers. He had built a vineyard. He cleared the hillside of rocks. He terraced the area. He built a wall and a watchtower to keep out thieves. He dug a winepress. He planted the vines. He pruned the vines. He tended the vines. He waited for years before the first harvest. All this work and now he invites the workers to help him bring in the harvest. He agrees to what is fair early in the morning. But he didn't stop there. He didn't just hire people at 6:00 a.m., like the standard practice might be. He went back at 9:00 a.m. and at noon and at 3:00 p.m. He is constantly scouring for workers, constantly looking for more people to bring into the vineyard, constantly agreeing to pay what is right. And do you see a little shift there? The workers at nine and noon and three are promised, "I will give you whatever is right." Give you whatever is right. The terms are less clear. The owner has more discretion. The owner literally says he will give them, not pay them. The workers are trusting a little more in the owner. Were they expecting a full denarius? Maybe half? Maybe happy to get whatever they got? And for the 5 p.m. guys the owner simply says, and I'm translating literally, "Go into the vineyard." He doesn't even say to work. Do you see some hints of grace, of undeserved love?

But when 6:00 p.m. rolls around, the grace of the owner is on full display. The owner, who stands for God, calls his foreman, who stands for Jesus, the one who carries out the owner's gracious plan, and tells him, "Pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first." Now the cynic would say, "He's calling the last guys in first so they don't get a few extra minutes on the clock waiting in line. I mean, the first guys agreed to a denarius. They ain't gettin' any more anyway." But then comes the twist and if you listen to the parables of Jesus, they usually have a twist. He gives the last guys a denarius. A full denarius. A full day's wage for one hour's work. A full day's wage for one hour's work? Where do I find this guy? Sign me up! I want to work for him! Can I trade bosses? A full day's wage, for one hour's work. That doesn't seem fair! That's grace!

Well, the word starts to travel through the line, back toward the 3 p.m. and noon and 9 a.m. and 6 a.m. guys. They start thinking, especially the 6 a.m. guys, "If those guys worked one hour and got a full denarius, how much am I going to get? Three? Six? Nine? Twelve? I might get two weeks' pay in one day! I could take a vacation! This is awesome!" But when they finally make the front of the line, just one denarius. "One lousy denarius! What kind of jerk is this guy? We worked hard in a vineyard." It took two men to carry one cluster of grapes from this land. That's hard work. "We worked through the heat of the day." It can get over 100 degrees in Israel. Maybe these guys had a point. But keep in mind. They agreed to work for a denarius. That was fair. The landowner didn't go back on his agreement. The landowner didn't change the terms. They changed their attitude. They thought this guy was too generous to others and too stingy toward them. Grace is too easy. Grace is not fair.

The landowner changes his tone when they keep on grumbling against him. He says to one of them, "Friend." Now that sounds like a good word. But Jesus used this word to address Judas as Judas was coming to betray Jesus. This word for friend is used when there is generosity given by one and abused by the other. Some "friend." This word for friend is not, "Hey, good old buddy old pal." This word for friend is, "Dude! That's messed up! Dude! You got it all wrong!" Dude! I am being fair. We made an agreement. Then the landowner gets kind of short with them. "Take your pay and go." Ok. It's my money. I'm being generous. And you are grumbling

against me? Isn't it my money? Can't I do what I want with it? Don't give me that evil eye of jealousy. Just because you aren't so generous, don't grumble against me because I am.

Who would grumble against a generous person? Who would be upset when they got exactly what they agreed to? Who would be angry at such a nice guy? What about the guy I see in the mirror? What about you? I've gone to church all my life. You know how many Sunday mornings I dragged my tired butt out of bed and came! And now someone who gambled and cheated on his wife and went to jail starts coming for a few months and he gets the same heaven I do? That's not fair! You mean I stick around for Bible class and miss kickoff and I come here at least one other night every week for a meeting or a something and you're saying that God doesn't love me any more than someone who puts in their 61 minutes once a month? That's not fair! Exactly. It's not fair. If God gave us our wages, what would we have coming? The wages of sin is death. If God gave me what I deserved, I would be in hell. If God paid you your wages, you'd already be right next to me, weeping and gnashing your teeth.

But God does not treat us as our sins deserve! That's grace! I have to say that again. God does not treat us as our sins deserve. That's grace. God doesn't give us death. God gives us eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Yes not the death we deserve, but the life Jesus won, eternal life, perfect life. Life in heaven in God's perfect vineyard where there is no burden of work. There is no heat of the day. There is God, welcoming you to the mansion he has prepared. There is God setting before you a perfect meal of free food you didn't cook and that always tastes better, right? God doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. God treats us as his grace decided. God didn't give us what we deserved. God gave us what we don't deserve: his love, his forgiveness, his grace.

You know, we've talked a lot about work and agreements in this parable and this sermon, but let's never, for even one second, have the impression that we will enter the heavenly vineyard on a bargain with God. This is God's agreement with us, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." That's it. There's no if. There's no but. That's God's agreement, forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more. That's God's grace. God doesn't give us what we do deserve. God gives us what we don't deserve. I know I'm repeating that and if you are counting how many times we've defined grace in this sermon you probably stopped counting, but that's because grace is so unusual, so amazing. The workers were so surprised at grace they grumbled at it. They grumbled because they didn't understand grace. They didn't understand not getting what you do deserve. They didn't understand getting what you don't deserve.

You see, first we have to understand grace, underserved love, for ourselves before we can see or even imagine God showing grace to anyone else, right? I mean when I know that I was headed for hell but God gave me heaven instead, it will be a whole lot easier to see God treating someone else the same way. But if I think I'm headed to heaven because of all my work, then I will have a problem with someone else, who hasn't done as much work as I think I have, getting to heaven.

It's only through the lens of grace that we can understand Jesus' closing words, "The first will be last and the last will be first." Those who think they deserve the first place in line with God, will end up last. Those who think they deserve last place and know I deserve last place are the ones who can appreciate, understand, treasure grace. Make sense? I realize this statement, "The last will be first and the first will be last," sounds strange, cryptic, backwards. It really doesn't seem fair. But that's how God operates. God operates by grace. God's grace isn't fair. Amen.