

Scripture:

Matthew 20:1-16

“Fairness and grace.”

Today we have before us a passage in Matthew’s gospel that ----- plain and simple ----- just isn’t fair.

On the one hand we are told about a handful of workers who worked hard the entire day ----- those who were hired --- “early in the morning” ---- as the first verse says.

And then there are those hired ---- at the third hour --- or 3 hours later.

And then there are those hired --- at the sixth hour --- six hours after those very first workers were hired.

And there are those hired at the 9th hour --- and --- according to verse 6 ---- there are finally even those hired at the 11th hour --- 11 hours after the first workers were hired.

At that time ---- for that particular job --- a standard work day was 12 hours -- so those hired at the eleventh hour would basically only ever work for 1 hour.

So there are those who worked 12 hours --- 9 hours ---- 6 hours ---- 3 hours -- and then there are those who worked just 1 hour.

And at the end of the day the landowner ----- the boss --- pays all the workers --- whether they worked 12 --- 9 ----- 6 ---- 3 ----- or 1 hour ---- exactly the same wage.

And --- as it is all too easy to imagine ----- those who worked longer and harder are irate.

“It isn’t fair!” ----- they say.

“We worked longer and harder ----- we produced more --- we accomplished more ----- you made more money because of us ----- so ----- how come we don’t get paid more?”

Doesn't it make sense that those who worked harder and longer would be paid more?

Perhaps.

But ---- on this day --- at this job site ---- it doesn't work this way.

In verse 9 we see that the landowner goes to those who were hired at the 11th hour and pays them a denarius ---- a usual full day's wages.

On witnessing this ---- those who were hired at the beginning of the day ---- who agreed ---- as verse 2 makes clear --- to work for a denarius for the whole day ----- become rather excited and expectant.

“If he would pay these workers who only worked one hour a full day's wages ----- what might we get?” ----- they were no doubt thinking to themselves.

And you can well imagine them plotting out what they will do with the large sum they assume they are about to receive.

Only to find out that they too will get ---- the one single denarius --- that they had agreed to earlier that same morning.

Picking it up at verse 12 --- the all day ---- 12 hour workers grumble against the landowner saying ----- “These men 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.”

In other words ---- “This isn't fair ---- we worked longer and harder than these other men have --- how can you pay us the same ---- you owe us more.”

To which the landowner replies ----- beginning at verse 13 ---- “Friend, I am not being unfair to you, didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man 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?”

“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

I’m willing to surmise that most of us understand perfectly well how those hired early --- hard working --- long working --- labourers felt.

They’re thinking something like ---- isn’t it ---- “Equal pay for equal work.”

But this wasn’t equal work --- so it shouldn’t be equal pay.

Imagine standing in line at the grocery store and the person in front of you has a bag of milk --- and the cashier rings it in and says 25 cents please ----- and the person in front of you --- rather astounded --- pulls out a quarter --- pays ---- and leaves with a big ---- and also rather confused smile on their face.

And then up you step --- put the same bag of milk on the counter and the clerk says 4 dollars and 59 cents please.

So you stop and say something like --- “Hey wait a minute ---- the guy in front of me only paid 25 cents that’s all I want to pay too --- and the clerk says --- no it’s 4.59 for you just like the sign in the window says.”

“But it’s not fair --- he just paid 25 cents --- why should I pay 4.59 ----- ---- - you can’t do that ----- it isn’t fair.”

“But ----- well ----- I’m the store owner and I’m only charging you what the sign says ----- don’t I have the right to charge whatever I want to charge ---- it’s my money ----- or are you envious because I am generous.”

Or you’re in line at the gas station and the clerk says to the person in front of you ----- it’s half price today sir ---- your bill only comes to \$30 today.

And yet when you step up --- it’s back to full price --- “Wait a minute you say --- how come it was half price for the guy before me and now it’s full price for me?” ---- “Oh I was just giving that guy a deal --- don’t worry about it ---- you’re paying exactly what the pump said anyway.”

Wait a minute ----- what about me --- how come I don’t get the deal --- it’s not fair?

The truth is ----- whether we are able to articulate it clearly --- or at all ---- we all have a sense of what is fair and what isn't.

“Why should the worker who only worked 1 hour get paid the same as me -- -- who worked 12?”

“Why should the guy in front of me get a bag of milk for 25 cents when I have to pay almost \$5?”

“Who does the guy in front of me get a deal on his gas and I don't.”

It's not fair.

We want life --- we want things to be fair.

And if there is going to be generosity ----- and we're all for generosity --- but if there is going to be generosity ----- we want to be the ones benefiting from it.

Few people are against generosity --- few people are against grace and mercy.

But --- and here's the catch ----- many only want generosity and grace and mercy on their terms.

In some kind of a predictable way ---- a nice --- fair --- “right” way.

At first the workers in Matthew's gospel ----- take some delight and relish in the generosity of the landowner --- they become expectant --- as verse 10 says --- expectant to receive more.

But when that same generosity isn't shared with them then they don't like it anymore.

Generosity is good ----- but really maybe it's only good when it's expressed towards them.

“Are you envious because I am generous?” ----- the landowner says in verse 15.

In other words ----- “Are you upset because I haven’t been as generous with you as I have with them?”

And of course the answer is --- “Yes!” ---- “Yes we are upset that the generosity you showed to them you didn’t also extend to me.”

“Yes I am upset that the guy in front of me got his milk for 25 cents and I have to pay almost 5 bucks.”

“Yes I am upset that the guy in front of me got his gas for half price and I have to pay full price.”

“It’s not right --- it’s not fair ---- that generosity should have been extended to me too!”

It’s not fair --- whatever fair actually means ---- the exact same for all I guess --- but then again that’s exactly what the landowner did and that still didn’t seem fair.

This parable --- the selectively generous landowner in Matthew’s gospel today ---- contradicts our understanding of fairness ----- it disrupts the usual --- agreed upon standards in society.

It disrupts the idea that those who work harder and longer get paid more at the end of the day ----- because that is explicitly not the case here.

And the reason why is simple.

There is fairness and then there is grace ---- God’s grace.

There is fairness and then there is grace --- they’re not the same thing at all.

Part of what this passage says to us is that it’s not necessarily the case that those who work harder and longer get paid more.

Grace doesn’t work on merit and hard work --- and time put in.

Grace works as grace works ---- according to its own precepts and principles.

Grace works on a completely different plane than fairness.

Fairness is a worldly concept ---- grace is a Divine reality.

Grace transcends fairness -----

---- grace transcends merit ----

----- grace transcends any kind of --- “I deserve it ---- and I’m entitled to it.” ---- way of thinking.

Grace points to reality and the love and compassion of God as perfectly and completely expressed in Jesus Christ.

When Jesus says --- as He does in the very last line from our gospel reading today that ---- “the last will be first, and the first last.” ----- part of what He means is that there is a complete reversal --- an overturning of the way things are whenever God so chooses to exercise His Divine grace.

And this reversal and overturning of the way things are is so all pervasive --- and all inclusive ----- that it may even be that the last will be first and the first last.

In other words grace isn’t just about a minor shake up or re-ordering of things such that those in the middle get shuffled around a bit while those on the ends ---- the firsts and the lasts ----- don’t move much at all.

The change Jesus is talking about ----- the generosity ---- the unmerited favour ----- the Divine grace that Jesus is talking about ---- isn’t just a matter of those in spots say 4 and 6 swapping --- or those in 2 and 5 swapping.

It’s about those in the 943rd spot ----- 943 out of 943 vaulting up into first place and the first place falling all the way back to ----- 943rd or whatever place last place is.

With grace --- everything is on the line ----- and not just a few minor alterations.

Presbyterian Pastor and Theologian Timothy Keller out of Redeemer Church in New York City ----- one of my favourite theologians alive today -----

expresses the radical ---- uncontrollable --- “plays by its own rules” ----- nature of Divine grace beautifully.

He says ---- “When we say “I can’t believe in a God who would _____” ----- we’re saying that we don’t really want a God beyond our comprehension.

Again ----- “When we say “I can’t believe in a God who would _____” ----- we’re saying that we don’t really want a God beyond our comprehension.

For today ---- the up early working 12 hour day workers are saying ---- “I can’t believe in a landowner who would pay everyone the same wage whether they worked ----- 12 ---- 9 --- 6 ---- 3 ----- or 1 hour.”

And I can’t believe or accept that because I want a landowner within ----- and not beyond ----- my comprehension.

I want someone who plays by the rules.

Grace doesn’t play by the rules.

Often we might think something like ----- “I struggle with a God who would treat Paul Bernardo ---- or Hitler ----- or Ted Bundy ----- or Charles Manson --- or a proven repeat offender time after time after time criminal --- or a child molester --- or cold blooded murderer ----- with the same kind of ----- and same amount of grace ---- as someone like Mother Theresa ----- - or Desmond Tutu.

And yet ----- that’s exactly how grace works --- not due to merit or works or accomplishments --- not on account of how hard or how long we have worked or what we may have accomplished.

Grace is God’s undeserved favour that is open to all who simply believe.

You can’t earn it ---- it is simply given as God so chooses ---- and God chooses everyone ----- as long as they believe.

In a certain sense --- it’s that simple --- and that powerful.

If we think about what Tim Keller has said ----- “When we say “I can’t believe in as God who would _____” ----- we’re saying that we don’t really want a God beyond our comprehension.” ----- it’s profound.

And it’s profound --- because God’s grace is often beyond our comprehension.

Not only does grace transcend any and all sense of fairness ---- merit --- deservedness ----- it also transcends comprehension.

The great Martin Luther said ---- “Anyone who thinks they’ve got a firm and complete grip on the gospel isn’t really talking about the gospel.”

The same can be said of grace --- “Anyone who thinks they’ve got a firm and complete grip or understanding of the grace of God isn’t really talking about or dealing with God’s grace.”

The gospel ---- the grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ ----- goes far -- ----- far beyond human comprehension.

We can’t wrap our heads around it and contain it.

As vibrant and bright and truly faithful as we may be ---- the grace of God remains something far greater --- and far more beautiful than we will ever totally understand or comprehend ---- at least this side of the grave anyway.

And that’s O.K.

We’re not called to understand ---- we are called to accept and believe --- and share and celebrate.

The workers may not ever understand why and how the landowner would ever pay everyone the same amount at the end of the day whether they worked this much or that much or this long or that long.

It’s not for them to understand --- they are called to work and do as they have been called to do ----- and not concern themselves with comparing themselves to others --- or wanting generosity and merit but only when it applies to themselves.

So it is with us ----- we are called to the tasks and witness that God calls us to --- be it long or short --- extremely difficult and challenging or perhaps less so than others.

Either way we are not called to try to negotiate with God at the end of the day as to what we deserve ----- or what others deserve --- that's not how it works.

Once we believe and accept the grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ -- ---- we leave it all in God's hands ----- and accept providence ---- God's will and God's way --- when --- and how --- and why --- God see's fit.

As difficult --- and challenging ---- and unfair ---- as this may seem at times ----- we are called to rest assured that all is indeed in God' hands and therefore all will work out just as He so desires.

Grace is all about a very long view ----- a view that sees beyond just our earthly time and goes on into eternity as well.

If we say things well ----- "I just can't believe in as God who would

"I can't believe in as God who would pay someone who did a job for 12 hours the same amount as someone else who did that exact same job for just 1 hour."

What we're really saying is that we want God to be fair --- we want Him to do what we want.

When we say that we want God to be fair ----- whatever fair actually means ----- part of what we're saying is that we want God to be predictable and small enough to fit into the confines of our minds.

Mercy and grace are not subject to anything but God.

It's not by mistake that when God reveals Himself to Moses in the Old Testament --- in Exodus chapter 3 -- He says ----- "I am who I am."

"I am who I am." ----- as in there is nothing or no one to whom you can compare me --- "I am who I am."

So it is with grace --- grace cannot be compared to anything else ---- grace is grace --- it is what it is ---- something entirely unto itself ----- incomprehensible at times and often unpredictable --- subject only to God.

The only difference between God and Moses at the burning bush and God in Christ in the gospels --- is that now in Christ we see what exactly that grace -- what exactly that “I am who I am” ---- look like in human form --- in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is God’s grace lived out in human form.

Jesus isn’t fairness lived out in human form ---- He’s grace lived out in human form.

Fairness is a worldly and a human concept ---- and can change depending on the eye of the beholder ----- it isn’t necessarily grounded or rooted to anything.

Jesus on the other hand ----- is God’s grace come to life.

He is what we are called to emulate and imitate.

The landowner in Matthew’s gospel today is a fine example of just how God’s grace sometimes works.

The landowner’s actions ----- his unmerited favour and generosity is upsetting to some ---- some workers don’t like it.

Sure they like the idea of generosity and favour ----- but they only like the idea of generosity and favour when it applies to them as well.

Grace will sometimes upset and frustrate people --- because it may not manifest itself in ways that they appreciate ----- in timelines that they appreciate.

Such is grace.

Unpredictable ----- incomprehensible ----- generous --- beautiful ----- all pervasive ----- available to all ---- saving --- and loving.

All the workers were saved from going hungry at the end of the day.

To live in grace --- to live in the light of God' grace in Jesus Christ ----- is to see beyond what we can see ----- to trust beyond what we can see and understand.

It is to give over to the beautiful ----- unrestrained --- open to all ----- saving ---- loving ----- reconciling ----- redeeming nature of God.

Fairness is of the world.

Grace is of God.

Sometimes the two dovetail ----- and sometimes they clash.

Grace isn't subject to fairness ----- or merit ----- or that which is earned or deserved.

Grace is far more beautiful ---- and wonderful ---- and awe inspiring.

Christ is God's grace ----- Christ is "I am who I am" ---- personified ---- that to which nothing needs to be or can be added or taken away.

He is our rock and our redeemer.

He is the only one to ---- and through which ----- all things must pass.

He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

The only one worthy of our praise.

He is the one that assures us that the first and the last --- and everyone in between ----- is worthy of His saving love regardless of what they have done or what they have not done --- worked 12 hours or worked 1 hour and any and everything in between.

Praise be to Christ who sees us not in light of what we have done --- and instead comes to us because of who He is ----- the generous --- gracious --- loving ----- saving one.

Amen.