

“The Eleventh Hour”

Matthew 20:1-16

“That’s not fair!” There are so many times when you and I have heard that phrase. Usually from the mouths of children, right? “Tommy got the bigger cookie. That’s not fair!” “Susie didn’t have to make her bed and I did! That’s not fair!” Around our house, we have a saying: “Here’s a ticket to your snot fair. Go buy some snotten candy and ride on the booger cars.” The “snot fair” is an imaginary place we all travel to when we feel that someone else has gotten more than they deserve and we’ve been left empty handed.

Have you been to the “snot fair”? What was the occasion? Perhaps someone else won the lottery, got a better parking space than you did or a better grade on their paper. When you have said or heard the phrase, “That’s not fair!”?

“That’s not fair!” is the rallying cry of everyone who feels they got less than they deserved, especially compared to someone else. We all have this two-sided impulse: when we are offended, we want justice, but when we are the offenders, we want mercy. “That’s not fair,” unfortunately, is our natural reaction to most things in life.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. With a little direction from Jesus’ parable of the vineyard, we can take our selfish thoughts captive and instead understand how grace works in God’s kingdom. Let’s take a closer look.

As Jesus tells it, there is a landowner who needs to hire workers for his harvest. Apparently, it’s a big harvest, because he goes to the market place not once, not twice, but five times to hire workers. It is significant that the owner, not his foreman, goes to make the hires. Perhaps it is an early tip that this man is unconventional.

Now, the very first group the owner hires, at sunrise, agrees to work for the common wage, a denarius each, for the whole day. I would estimate that would be about \$100 today. The point is, it is a decent wage, and the first group readily agrees to it. They know what they are getting into. It’s going to be a long, hot day, but the owner promises them a fair wage, and these workers accept it, and start working in the vineyard.

However it appears that the first group won't suffice to complete the work. So the owner goes back to the market a few hours later, around 9 AM, and hires a new group. Notice the exact wording in verse 4: He tells them, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” This time, no price is specified, but the second group agrees to go.

The same thing happens at noon, and at three o'clock. Each time the owner goes to the market, he finds more workers standing around, and he offers them to come work for “whatever is right.” He never actually says what he will pay them.

He goes back one more time, at the “eleventh hour,” which we could say was five o'clock; in other words, an hour before quitting time. The owner still finds more workers standing around. Why? Look at verse 6. “Because no one has hired us.” The owner says, “Come work for me,” and they do.

So, here's the situation. Those hired first worked the longest, obviously, but when the day is done, the foremen has them stand in reverse order of hire to receive their paychecks. Surprisingly, those who came to work last, who were there for one mere hour, still get a full day's wages. They get their denarius or \$100. So do the people who worked three, six, and nine hours. So when the last group comes up, the ones who worked the full 12-hour shift, they are thinking, “I'll bet we get a bonus, too.” Instead, they get \$100, exactly the same as everyone else. And what do they say? “It's not fair! Look what we've done! We're exhausted, sweaty, and sun-burned from being here all day, and you only gave us \$100.”

The owner says, “Yup. I did. That's what we agreed on. Take it and go. Why should you be envious that I am generous with my own money?” He calls them out for their selfish attitudes and sense of elitism. The owner has the right to do give whatever he wants to whomever he wants, and he chooses to pay all the workers the same, no matter how long they worked for him.

These workers did exactly what the owner expected them to do; no more, no less. They knew, early in the morning, that they were getting into a difficult job, and they all agreed to it. They stuck it out to the end. And yet, they had a

feeling that they were entitled to more than what they received, even though, had the owner paid everyone else less, they would have been content.

Now, this is a parable, not to be taken literally. The point of this story is not to think about economics and production, it is to check our attitudes when we think we’ve got special favors coming from God.

The fact is throughout the history of the Jewish and Christian people, there have been those who have succumbed to an elitist, prideful attitude about their relationship with God. Jesus told this parable of the vineyard to Jewish people who thought they had it tight with God. They were the children of Abraham, the people of the covenant. They were the descendants of the ones brought out of Egypt, the ones who saw and heard God on Mount Sinai. They were the people of King David, the survivors of the exile. They thought they had been in the vineyard the longest, working the hardest, the closest to God. Didn’t they deserve extra privileges, extra blessings from God, at the exclusion of others?

This was a hard message for them, as it is for us. Let’s face it: if we work extra hard, we feel like we should be rewarded. I should get a little more on top. “Come on, God! I’ve been in the church longer. Shouldn’t I get a little extra something for my time? A little extra manna from heaven?” We start to let that “snot fair” attitude creep in when we compare our struggles to others who we think have it easy.

Jesus says to us, “No way. That’s not how God’s kingdom works.” God’s economy takes the world’s economy and flips it upside-down right. The first are last and the last are first. The rich are poor and the poor receive blessings. The mourners are happy. The hungry are filled, the rich go away empty. God takes everything that we seem to know, everything we think is normal and common sense, and stands it on its head. That’s how God’s kingdom works. Why? Because God’s kingdom is a blessing for everyone, not just those who have been around the block a few times.

If you look at United Methodist history, there have been many movements to reclaim our “Wesleyan roots,” and “true Christianity.” There have been numerous voices who have told others, “No, no, we are actually the ones who are closest to God, we are the ones who have got it right, we are closer to the original

faith than you are. We’re going to split off and do the right thing and receive God’s blessing for ourselves.”

Do you understand that none of us have been “in the vineyard” since the beginning? I don’t care if you are 95 years old and your grandparents started the church; in the grand scheme of things, you’re still a baby to Christianity. The revivalists of the last century, our Wesleyan ancestors, the Reformers of the 1500’s, even the disciples of Christ themselves, were all newcomers to the vineyard. Peter, James, John and all the disciples were new to the fields. None of them, and none of us, have been working all day in God’s kingdom. We all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. We didn’t plant the vineyard, we were only invited to work for the harvest.

It doesn’t matter how long you have been in this church or any church, you have no special privileges or blessings from God over and above anyone else. You have no right to demand more than your share, more than your “daily wage.” In God’s kingdom, all are equal. Grace isn’t fair. That’s exactly the point. If it was fair, none of us would make it.

Rather than be resentful, we should be excited that God continually brings new people in his glorious kingdom. Go back to the parable for a moment. The workers that were hired with only one hour to go, what was their day like? Did you consider their mindset? Standing in the marketplace all day with no one to hire them, they may have despaired. They were rejected every time.

Imagine one them; let’s call him Joe. Joe knows his family depends on him. Every day, Joe sees the look on his wife’s and children’s faces, when he comes home with next to nothing. Then, one day, Joe bursts into the home shouting, “Guess what? I only worked for an hour today!” Joe’s wife makes a snarky comment like, “Great. That should be enough for, what, a slice of bread for each of us?” “No!” cries Joe, “You’ll never believe this. For one hour of work, I got paid \$100!” What a miracle! What an unexpected blessing! That’s grace.

The workers who were there all day probably went home and complained to their wives, instead of seeing the blessing they had received by even finding work. In the midst of saying, “It’s not fair,” they missed some pretty important blessings. Think about their productivity for a moment. They had indeed spent

all day sweating the sun, backs bent over and sore from the hard labor. By midafternoon, they were slumping. Exhausted. But what about those who came in at 5:00? You know they were fresh. Working extra hard. This is a truth every coach knows: you need more than just the starters to win a game. You need people to come in off of the bench, relievers, fresh bodies to achieve victory. Instead of complaining, those early workers should have been thrilled to see the extra help come in. They should have welcomed them, hugged them, cheered them on. The harvest was too big for the first crew, anyway. They needed help so the fruit could be brought in, sold, and they could all get paid.

This, then, is what we need to understand in the church. God's grace is more than any of us deserve. That's why it's called grace. When God chooses to bless others, we should get excited. And when God sends us new people in the church, in the kingdom, we should embrace them and offer to work beside them. That does not mean we hand them a shovel and say, "I'm done. You start digging while I go take a break." It means mentoring them, helping them grow in faith, hope, and love, while we all enjoy the harvest.

The ones who have been in the vineyard the longest are charged with discipling those who come later, not becoming resentful. Is it a "snot fair" for you, or do you think, "I can't believe how good your grace is, God, that you would share this with others"?

It is time for a heart check. You might think you have been hard at work in the vineyard, and you resent God for showing his grace to so many who haven't put in their time yet. If so, you need to understand how God's kingdom works. And if you think you don't deserve God's grace because you only just arrived, you need to know that you have just as much access to Jesus and salvation as everyone does. We are all in this together.

Memory Verse: Matthew 20:16 (NLT)

"So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last."

Thoughts for reflection:

1. What blessings has God given me that I may take for granted?
2. How has the grace of Jesus saved me?
3. How envious am I of those who received unexpected blessings?
4. How often do I criticize others for being “new Christians” instead of offering to mentor them?
5. Will I allow God to correct my behaviors and attitudes for the sake of Christ’s church and the king of heaven?