

## SERMON CCI Matthew 20: 1-16 *Is Grace Fair?*

Pastor and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor says this strange parable is a little like cod liver oil; you know Jesus is right, you know it must be good for you, but that does not make it any easier to swallow.<sup>1</sup> This parable is all about God's grace even though the word grace is never mentioned. And it's so radical that it offends our sense of fairness. We understand fairness- if we work hard at work and do a good job, it is fair that we get ahead at work. In school, students who work hard and do all the assignments well, receive grades that reflect their work. If you get caught driving over the speed limit, a speeding ticket is fair and just. Our world is based on fairness and we like it that way. In fact, sometimes God's grace seems a bit unfair, like in this parable.

Fairness was important to our 2 kids growing up. If there was one cookie left over after all of us had had one, who gets the last one? Both kids believed they should get it. So here's what we did to be fair. One child would get to cut the cookie in half, and the other child got to choose which piece they wanted. Believe me, the one cutting that cookie took great pains to cut it precisely in half, eyeing it carefully from all angles, almost using a ruler to make sure both pieces were exactly the same size because they didn't get to choose which piece they got. It felt fair and no one grumbled. Unlike in Jesus' parable.

Jesus told today's parable in response to a question that Peter asked after Jesus had told a rich young man that to have eternal life he needed to sell everything he owned and give the money to the poor and come follow Jesus. But that was too high a cost and he walked away instead. Peter asked, "**We** have left **everything** to follow you. What's in it for us?" Jesus' answer was, "Anyone who sacrifices for me will have everything they need in this life plus more in the life to come. **But** the first shall be last and the last shall be first." And he told this hard-to-swallow parable to explain.

A vineyard owner's crop of grapes was ready to be harvested and needed to be picked quickly for the best yield. Wait too long or the grapes would rot. He sent his manager to the city square early in the morning to hire some workers who agreed to be paid a denarius, which was the average day's pay for a day worker. Rob and I see men like these standing around in the Home Depot parking lot every time we go there. Eager for a contractor to come along and offer them work for

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, (2004). *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 100.

the day. The men in the parable were happy for the job and stated work at 6 am. At 9 am the manager decided he needed more workers to get the grapes harvested in time so he hired more workers, who agreed to work for “whatever is right.” They were just glad to work at all. At noon, more laborers were hired and again at 3 pm and again at 5 pm.

It was customary to pay the day laborers at the end of the day, so at 6 pm the manager called all the workers to line up to get paid. But the owner of the vineyard felt like being generous. Everyone would be paid, everyone would have plenty, no one would be left out. He simply wanted to reverse the order and pay all the workers the same thing, regardless of how long they had labored. Imagine being the last workers hired and being called to the front of the line. Then a denarius is placed in your hand. You would jump with joy over the unexpected gift—a whole day’s pay for an hour of work. They knew they hadn’t earned it. They also knew they would work for this manager anytime! The men in line strained to see what was making them so happy. The message gets passed down that the latecomers got a denarius. Whoa! If **they** got a denarius, how much more will **we** get? Happy days are here again!

Now imagine being at the back of the line waiting your turn. You have worked the longest and the hardest. Surely all your work will be rewarded and you will now be rich. And then a denarius is pressed into your hand, and your excitement sours. “You have made **them** equal to **us** who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat?” Unfair! And we understand. Equal pay for equal work is fair; equal pay for unequal work is **not** fair.

It happens all the time. Perhaps you know someone who cared for their elderly father or mother, doing everything that needed to be done to make their life good. The brothers and sisters rarely came by to visit or help. They called sometimes and say how grateful they are, but they didn’t offer to help. Then the parent died and suddenly the whole family appeared. The person who has spent his own money caring for his parent sits and listens as the will is read: “I leave my estate to be divided equally among my four dear children because I love them all the same.” It’s like a teacher giving all students an A regardless of their work. Or like a boss who pays all the employees the same pay regardless of how many hours they work. It just isn’t fair.

Which is why it seems so important that God be fair, God should be the one we can count on to reward people according to their efforts, who keeps record of

how many hours you worked, how tired you got at times, how much you sacrificed. God should be the one who keeps the first first and the last last where they belong, right? Life may not be fair, but God should be.

That's what Peter wanted when he asked, "We have left everything to follow you, so what's in it for us?" In the kingdom of God, can we count on God being fair? If we have followed Jesus longer, or worked harder, do we have the right to expect more from God?

The key to the parable is the contrast between those who came at the last hour and those who came at the first hour. Those who came at the last hour were given a full day's wage for working one hour and they understood that their wage was undeserved and unearned. Their wage was sheer grace. They were thrilled to receive so much.

Those who had worked 12 hours also received a full day's wage, they had received exactly what they agreed to be paid. But somehow what they had been happy to be paid was now not enough if everyone else got the same thing. "You have made those other people who did less equal to us." And don't we in the church feel this way too? The people who give the most money get angry because younger members are elected to the Board instead of them. How many church arguments have taken place over the color of carpet with everyone claiming to more right to decide than others. People who've been members longer expect the right to call the shots on music choices, times of worship, how money is spent, sometimes even which seats are theirs to sit on. Pastors aren't immune. Pastors expect to be have authority because, after all, they have the theological degrees and the head position in the church. The church owes it to them to do what the pastor wants to do. So often the kingdom of God principle of equal grace for all gets lost. And we can fight for our rightful place of first in line; let those people who haven't worked as hard as us get in the back where they belong. Or worse, we can not even care whether those people have a place in line at all. And we can subtly, or not so subtly, tell them that if they don't like being in back, they can go somewhere else.

Where do we find ourselves in this story? Front of the line or the back? The story sounds differently from the back of the line than it does at the front of the line. The front of the line was filled with joy; the end of the line was filled with grumbling. Don't most of us feel like those at the end of the line? **We** are the ones who got up early and sacrificed and worked hard for so long, and for what? So

someone can come along late in the day and receive the same grace and privilege as us? We've earned our place at the front!

But what if we are mistaken about where we belong in the line? What if in God's eyes, we are halfway back, that there are all sorts of people ahead of us, people who are far more deserving than we are, people who worked even harder and longer before we ever got in line? The people who first imagined having a church in this town, the ones prayed and worked and sacrificed to start this church in the late 1800's. And before them were people who prayed and prayed for someone who could start a church here. And before that were people in other places who prayed that people in Issaquah would come to Christ here. And before that were centuries of faithful followers of Christ who worked hard in lands far away to bring the good news of Jesus to Gentiles, people like Paul, Peter, Barnabus, Silas, Phoebe, and Junias, people who suffered for their faith, and kept working, and praying and giving, and sharing, and always making room for new people. Their hearts were focused on bringing new people in. Some even died for their faith. Friends, we're all in line with those who came before us, who worked long before we ever got here and dreamed of this church sharing the good news until Jesus comes again. We're the late hires compared to them. Someone cared enough to invite us in. Invited by people who never lost sight of the fact that in God's kingdom of grace, it doesn't matter where we are in line, we'll always have enough. People who could let go of the desire to be first, let go of the desire to have their wants and needs come first, and happily made room for the next people God was calling into the line. Us. Who are we inviting into line?

God is not fair; God is generous like the vineyard owner. In the kingdom of God, there's grace for all, we don't have to be afraid that if we let go of our claim to be at the front of the line, there won't be enough. Will we make room for the next people God is calling like people made room for us? New people with new ideas? Like the new ideas you brought when **you** first came. They may even sit in the chairs you want to sit in. Will we invite them to join us in line knowing there'll always be a place for us too? May God enlarge our hearts and minds to love the people out there as we love ourselves, so we don't drive people away to keep our place in line.