

Sermon Septuagesima Sunday 2016  
Pastor James Preus  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
January 24, 2016  
Matthew 20:1-16

“That’s not fair!” I do not look forward to the day my daughter learns that phrase. Fairness is one of the biggest concerns in our life, and someone always has an argument why he isn’t being treated fairly. And whoever is in authority will be challenged as to how fairly he treats his children, students, and employees. Children complain to their parents about unfair treatment among their siblings. Employees grumble if they think their co-workers got a better assignment than them. And the student who got a lower grade will ask to compare test answers with other students, sure that the professor was biased against him. Everyone wants *fair* treatment!

But what is fair? The workers who answered the master’s call at the first hour certainly didn’t think it was fair that those who came at the eleventh hour got the same payment. Could you imagine, working in the summer heat, hands swollen and callused, your body drained of all its energy, and the guys who didn’t even break a sweat get paid first and the exact same as you! That’s not fair. Except, in this parable, Jesus agrees with the workers at the beginning for a denarius a day, the standard payment for a day’s work. So they weren’t mistreated at all. They got what they agreed to. The workers in the parable, however, are upset at the payment of those who worked less. They were offended that the master didn’t value their work less.

The master told the latecomers to go into his vineyard and he would pay them whatever was “right” (20:4). Who determines what is right? The master did! There was

no negotiation or contract signed. The workers simply trusted that the master would treat them fairly. And did he? No. He gave them *more* than they deserved.

What is *fair* and what God says is *right* are not always the same thing. But the master didn't determine how much he would pay his workers by what was *fair*. He determined it right and just to pay his workers out of his own generosity. Whether they worked a lot or a little, the master paid them all the same. God is the same way. He doesn't treat us according to what is *fair*. He treats us according to his *grace*.

What is grace? Grace is God's undeserved love for us. God's grace does not depend on you at all. It's a gift. It's free. It doesn't require works. As St. Paul says, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." (Rom. 11:6) The workers all got paid the same, because it didn't depend on their works, it depended on their masters' generosity.

Grace is either loved or hated. It's hated by those who think they've done enough, who are proud of their works and think they are better than others. But to those who know their works are filthy rags, who know they have not done enough, and don't even bother comparing their works to others, they love grace, grace is their only hope for salvation. Grace isn't fair. But unlike what our sinful nature tells us, grace does us no wrong.

It was fair for the laborers to get their agreed upon wages. And it is fair for us sinners to get our deserved wage: death. But is it fair that Christ is humiliated? Is it fair that his disciple Judas betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver? Is it fair that his disciples abandoned him and denied him? Is it fair that Jesus, the Holy One of Israel, must be subjected to a trial by a phony chief priest and king and a foreign heathen governor? Is it

fair that the one who never lied is condemned for blasphemy? Is it fair that the one who never sinned is forsaken by God as he dies a sinners death on the cross? Is it fair? Of course it's not fair!

Thank God he didn't do what's fair. If Christ did not suffer and die for our sins, we would still bear them. And God would make us pay their full price. But by *grace* God punishes Jesus for your sins and calls you innocent. By grace God forgives you and calls it just and right. What God determined to be right is much better than what we would call fair.

The workers complained, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." They complained that he made them *equal*. And that is exactly what he did. Grace is the great equalizer. It makes everyone equal, because everyone receives the same thing. St. Paul writes to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28)

According to the Gospel, all Christians are the same. The one who makes a six-figured salary is equal to the one who lives in poverty. The employer is equal to the employee, the teacher to the student, the parent to the child. The Gospel makes all believers equal, because there is only one Gospel. There is only one Christ. St. Paul writes to the Philippians, "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith"

Have you received a different Christ than the person sitting next to you? Is your Baptism worse or better than mine? Does one person come to the communion rail and receive the whole Christ and another receives only half of him? What ridiculous questions! You are saved by grace, that is, by God's undeserved love he has given you a gift: Jesus Christ. Through faith you receive Jesus, his forgiveness and righteousness. When he forgives you, he forgives all your sins. When he gives you his righteousness, he gives you all his righteousness. The newly baptized is equal with the seasoned Christian, because our righteousness does not depend on our works. Our righteousness, our forgiveness, our salvation, all depends on God's gift, which comes from faith.

Through faith you receive the whole Christ. Even if your faith is weak, you still receive all of him. Therefore, it is impossible to say that one Christian is holier or better than another. That is like saying one Christian has a better Christ than another. But there is only one Christ, Jesus.

There is inequality in the world. God has established order. In this world, according to the law, the student must obey the teacher, the child her parents, the employee his employer. This has to be and God forbids us from breaking this order. Rather he says, Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13) and children and servants are to obey their parents and masters (Eph. 6). Yet according to the Gospel, all Christians are judged the same. For the same Jesus died for the mother and the baby, for the king and the peasant, for the rich and the poor. I depend on the same precious blood shed on the cross for my eternal salvation as you. What good news. Thank God he doesn't treat us fairly according to our works, but saves us by his own generosity

by grace through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, to *him* alone be glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.