

Pentecost 16A (9/24/17)

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

**Matthew 20:1-16**

*Our sense of entitlement is more deeply rooted than we would like to admit. Generosity is good, but it's secondary to fairness. Our desire is that everyone get what's fair, but God's desire is that everyone get what they need. God is radically gracious, defying our expectations for the appropriate distribution of blessings. Rather than reinforce the order of things, grace overturns it, reminding us of our collective reliance on God and our responsibility to each other.*

“God is a lousy bookkeeper.”<sup>1</sup> That’s how one interpreter summarizes the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. For goodness’ sake, this is not how you run a business. It doesn’t make any sense. What’s worse, it’s unfair. How can you expect your employees to gauge their productivity unless you compensate them accordingly? A day’s pay for an hour of work, and nothing more for the ones who work the full day? What is the landowner thinking? “Friend, I am doing you no wrong,” he replies to one of the grumbling laborers after all the wages have been distributed, “Are you envious because I am generous?”

If we’re honest, the answer we’d like to give is “Yes!” We’re quick to identify with the disgruntled laborers, the ones who work all day in the heat and receive the “usual daily wage.” The arrangement may have seemed fair at first, but then the latecomers arrive, work less time, and receive the same compensation. So, the objection is warranted, isn’t it? **How can the hardest workers measure themselves against the others unless the size of their reward matches the extent of their effort? It’s as if all the laborers are equally valuable in the boss’**

---

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 96.

**eyes, regardless of their productivity. It's as if the boss is less concerned with fairness than with grace.**

If this parable bothers you, you're not alone. Jesus has a way of telling us the truth about ourselves<sup>2</sup> in a manner that reveals how far our instincts fall from God's intentions. **We identify with the grumbling laborers in the parable because our sense of entitlement is more deeply rooted than we would like to admit.**

Generosity is good, of course, but it's secondary to fairness. Fairness helps us make sense of the world. It's predictable: What I put in is generally what I should get out. And, according to the same logic, if I put in more than the next person, then I should also receive more. As long as everyone plays by the rules of fairness, we'll all know where we stand.

Of course, we tend to have an exaggerated view of our own deserving, don't we? After all, I work hard, so I've earned what I have. Never mind the series of advantages I enjoy, yet which I regularly take for granted: my race, my gender, access to quality healthcare and education, strong family support. I was born a few strides from the finish line, yet I prefer to imagine that I've won the race, while countless laborers the world around strive day in and day out to earn a pittance of what I have.

Upon closer inspection, the rules of fairness are flawed. Maybe this is why God changes the rules. **Paying the same rate to every laborer is no way to distinguish more valuable work from less. It is, however, an excellent way to make sure everyone has enough to eat.** The "usual daily wage" to which the

---

<sup>2</sup> Karoline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4970>.

parable refers is translated from the Greek “denarius,” the approximate value of each laborer’s basic needs. In other words, the denarius is representative of “daily bread,” or as Luther defines it, “everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies,” as well as the necessities for a full life, such as “good government... peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.”<sup>3</sup> By offering a denarius to every laborer, regardless of the work performed, the landowner ensures that no one goes without their daily bread. His method doesn’t conform to the rules of fairness, that’s for certain, but it does conform to priorities in the reign of heaven. **Our desire is that everyone get what’s fair, but God’s desire is that everyone get what they need.**

Have you seen the new Netflix original series, “Atypical”? Sam Gardner is a high school senior with autism, learning to thrive in a world designed for neurotypical people. Like many people on the autism spectrum, Sam has difficulty processing sensory information, which means that he’s unsettled by the sights, sounds, and physical sensations most people take for granted. As a result, for years he’s missed out on school events and birthday parties simply because of his need for quiet and calm.

Enter Paige, Sam’s quirky girlfriend, who decides to do something about his exclusion. She shows up at a PTA meeting to pitch her idea for the winter formal: “Silent Night: An Autism-Friendly Dance.” Paige proposes that the music for the dance be piped in through wireless headphones so Sam can participate without the

---

<sup>3</sup> *Luther’s Small Catechism*, 500 Years of Reformation Study Edition, 38.

risk of being overwhelmed by the noise. “I think that Newton High should be a place that’s inclusive of all students,” she insists.

The idea is well received until one of the parents at the meeting complains that her daughter’s hairdo will be ruined by the headphones. As it turns out, however, her objection comes from a deeper place: “It’s not just about the hair,” she says. “I mean, the winter formal is something our kids have looked forward to their entire high school career. Do we really need to change everything to accommodate one kid? I mean, a silent dance? It’s just so... sad.”<sup>4</sup> What she means is that a silent dance is *unfair*. *Why should everyone be required to adjust their expectations for the sake of a single student with distinct needs?*

I won’t spoil the season finale by telling you how the Newton High School winter formal turns out. But the parent’s objection to a silent dance comes from the same place of entitlement as the laborers’ complaint in Jesus’ parable. Our desire is that everyone get what’s fair, but God’s desire is that everyone get what they need.

Dear church, God doesn’t play by the rules of fairness. And, in spite of our grumbling, that’s good news. It means that **God reserves the right to be radically gracious to all of us, defying our expectations for the appropriate distribution of blessings. Like a denarius for an hour of work, everything we are and everything we have comes by grace alone.**<sup>5</sup> And, rather than reinforce the order of things, an order that is marked by all kinds of injustice and suffering, **grace overturns it, reminding us of our collective reliance on God and our responsibility to each other.**

---

<sup>4</sup> Season 1, episode 6.

<sup>5</sup> Bishop Wayne Miller, Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the ELCA.