

INI

“It’s not fair!” Anyone who has spent any extended time around children has likely heard that at some point. Different bedtimes. Different allowances. A piece of pie that is even one atom larger than another. These and many other circumstances are potential occasions for those words to be exclaimed by one of our little ones. Often they just don’t understand. They don’t get that another has done different things to earn different treatments or rewards. They don’t comprehend different values being assigned to different household chores. They don’t realize that different amounts of sleep are required based on differing ages or schedules. All they see is that something is different. And with much lip quivering and foot stomping and enough tears to fill a swimming pool, those words come out. “It’s not fair!”

Now, to be...well, fair...it’s not just the children. It comes from us grown ups too. Maybe less foot stomping is involved; but that action gets replaced. In the old days it was slamming the phone back on the hook. Now it’s a violent pressing of the “end call” button. Or maybe it’s a newspaper, a book, or a fist slamming down on a table. And we may be a little more articulate in our exclamations. We can describe with more eloquence exactly why we think or feel something is unjust as we comprehend more variables involved. But the sentiment is the same. “It’s not fair!”

Leading up to our reading this morning, Jesus told a rich young man that, in order to inherit eternal life, he must give up all of his possessions, sell them, and give the money to the poor. The man apparently was pretty good about outward righteous living, following the laws of the Torah. But the big thing getting in the way of his salvation was money. His security was not found in the gracious givings of the Heavenly Father, but in his own success and earthly treasures. The man went away sorrowful because this would have been too great of a sacrifice for him.

Shortly afterwards, Peter speaks for the group yet again. **“See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”** It seems Jesus didn’t think this to be an entirely stupid question because He answers Peter directly. **“Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”** But then some clarification is necessary, lest the disciples get the wrong idea.

Jesus tells them *“the parable of the laborers in the vineyard”* or perhaps better titled *“the parable of warning to the disciples against focusing on the rewards for discipleship and then making sinful comparisons between themselves and other disciples.”*⁽¹⁾ But that doesn’t roll off of the tongue quite as nicely, so we’ll stick with the title the editors have put into our Bibles.

The master of the house, who is a figure for God, goes out to hire laborers for the vineyard. In the morning he hires a group with an agreement of a denarius for a day of work. Then he goes out a few more times, hiring more workers. Finally, near the end of the day he finds some who have been idle all day and sends them out to work also, even though by they time they get to the field there is probably less than an hour to work.

Then comes time to square up. The later workers are paid first, receiving a denarius each. Well those first workers get excited. *“If they get a denarius, how much more will we get? Come on guys! Drinks are on me tonight!”* But then they also get a denarius and are furious. *“Hey guys! We worked all day! These slackers worked only an hour or less. What gives? It’s not fair!”*

But he replied to one of them, **“Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil and envious because I am generous?”**

The point is pretty clear. The first workers were only workers by the sheer grace of the one who hired them. The same was true for those who were hired later and later and finally near the end of the day.

We Lutherans shouldn’t have a problem with this. At least intellectually we rally around one of our themes of the Reformation. Ephesians 2:8-9 **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** We get that. We give thanks to God for that.

And then we run into a little problem. Verse 10 follows that with **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** And intellectually we can get behind that too. We know that our good works are our response to God’s grace. His desire

is for us to do good works, not to merit salvation, but just because that's what is expected of His children. And He is so gracious that He sends the Holy Spirit to work in us, to enable us to do the very works that He wants.

The problem is that we aren't doing these good works of faith alone. God has called many to be laborers in His vineyard. And it's so easy to take our focus off of our work and our Master who has called us by grace to do them and start focusing on the work of our fellow laborers.

"Well I have been a Christian my whole life. Baptized 2 minutes after I was born. Most of my friends are pastors or married to pastors or teach in Christian schools. I only missed church when I was a kid and had chicken pox. I lithe regularly. I attend every possible Bible class. I volunteer in the local food bank. The blood bank keeps turning me away saying that I need to wait much more than a week to give again. My dog is named Martin and my cat is named Luther. What do you do as a follower of Christ? Oh, you just come to church. I see. Well that's good for some, I guess..."

I mean, that's a pretty ridiculous example. But some of those notions, those ways of seeing ourselves and comparing ourselves to other Christians are really easy to slip into. Who has done the most for Jesus? That's what the competition becomes. *"Look at me, Jesus. Look how often I pray. Look how hard I worship You! Look how humble I am!"* And what comes along with that attitude that is so easy to slip into is that childish attitude of "it's not fair" as we compare our works which are so great in our own eyes with the seemingly feeble works of others.

And that attitude is very dangerous. It's dangerous inwardly because if we apply a human scale of fairness to our salvation then we become dependent more and more upon what we have done as we take our eyes off of the person and work of Jesus Christ our Savior. And it's dangerous outwardly because if we start focusing on the works of others, their shortcomings compared to our most admirable works, we again, take our eyes off of the person and work of our Savior Jesus Christ for them and for ourselves.

And if we think something of ourselves while looking down on others...if we are so self-righteous that the person who has been struggling with sin their whole life, who also has been reached by the Gospel...if that person is afraid to come into our church for forgiveness in fear of what we may think and how we might treat them due to their works from the 1st hour to the 11th hour, well then we are standing between them and Christ and have failed in our mission as Christ's Church.

This parable is not a model of how to run your business or what to expect if you are an employee. If you want scriptural guidance on that, the Apostle Paul does have some words to live by in Colossians and 1 Timothy. This parable is all about the grace of the kingdom, not about earthly fairness.

If you want a god who is fair, one who only calls the people whom you and I see as worthy, you won't find him in scripture. And if you want the God of scripture to be fair, with our sense of fairness, well then you and I are toast. In one of our liturgies we confess that "We justly deserve [His] present and eternal punishment." That's what *our* sense of fairness would get us. But thanks be to God that our God is not a god of fairness! Thanks be to God that He is a God of mercy and grace.

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares Yahweh. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than yours."
Isaiah 55:8-9

Our unfair God, our gracious and merciful God, in the ultimate act of unfairness punished *our* sins on His own perfectly righteous Son. Yet, as He hung on the cross bleeding for the sins of the world, the Son did not cry out "it's not fair." Instead, He cried out "Father, forgive them."^{Luke 23:34} And because He is a God of grace, not fairness, He gives to us His Son's righteousness, and promises us a resurrection also.

Whether you are here in church or out in the world, if you see a fellow laborer in God's vineyard struggling to do the work that He has called them to do, pray for them. Walk alongside them. Help them. And rejoice with them that they have been called as a fellow worker in Christ's vineyard and kingdom by His grace alone, regardless of the hour. And remind them of that.

And whether you are here in church or out in the world and *you* end up struggling with the work that God has called you to do, rejoice in the fact that you are also a worker by His grace alone. He didn't call you or me or any of our fellow laborers because we have proven ourselves worthy, not because it is the fair thing to do. He called you and me because He is gracious and merciful.

It's not fair. The kingdom of God is not fair. We enter it by His gracious calling and enduring mercy alone. Amen!