

**Message Delivered at Christ Church
Saturday & Sunday, September 17th & 18th, 2011**

TEXT: Matthew 20:1-16

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Good morning, everybody. Little chill in the air today; feels like autumn; hard to believe that Christmas is right around the corner, isn't it...that got your attention.

Now it's not really right around the corner. There are still ninety-eight shopping days left; something I paid no attention to until the other day when someone whose life is much more ordered than mine said that their Christmas shopping was just about done; which, quite frankly, left me in awe. And if that's your life; well, congratulations on getting into the vineyard so early.

I imagine the rest of us will get started on that a little bit later...maybe next week at the Consignment Sale! And if it is we have little ones at home...or grandchildren at home or somewhere else...and if your household is a bit like mine...or at least like mine was when the kids were younger...most likely all the time we're doing our Nativity gift accumulation, somewhere in the recesses of our mind we may keep a running total of expenditures...first, because that's good money management...good stewardship; but also because maybe we've realized along the way that that morning is a whole bunch more copacetic when everyone in our household receives blessings that are roughly equivalent in both value and volume. You know what I mean?

(And yes, I'm using some big words here to sort of help keep the secrets guarded...)

Because kids have a really strong understanding of what is fair. So that if one pile on the morning of December 25 looks like this, and another pile looks like this...there's a good chance they'll call you on it with the eternal words we have all uttered at some point: "It's not fair."

Ever heard that in one context or another? Maybe said it ourselves?

Fairness is a good we learn early; it's a value; we all want to be fair; we want the world to be fair; and when it's not, we are unsettled. Fairness matters, of course, because it is just; but also because it helps our existence to be well-ordered. I do this, and I know there are these consequences; I do that, and I know there are those consequences. Everything is a bit more dependable and under control when cause and effect are predictable and directly related to one another; when it's all fair.

So here comes Jesus; startling us as he usually does in his parables; and turning everything upside down one more time; because if we're honest, there's something a bit offensive in this story; it ain't quite fair...

There once was a man who owned a vineyard. When the time came to harvest the grapes, he did what vineyard owners do. He went to the town square to hire laborers to come work for him; to come serve him; to come and tend the vineyard. I've never worked on a farm, but I know on a farm that the day starts early. So it was about at dawn that he came to the town square, and hired the laborers, promising to pay them their daily wage...a wage that is just and fair for someone working in the fields all day.

A few hours later he went back to the town square to find more workers. Apparently, it's a rich harvest, and he needed more hands in the field. So at nine o'clock in the morning, and

then again at noon, he hired more people to work in the vineyard. And then promised to pay them whatever is right...a little bit different than what he said to those first workers.

Some five hours later...when the day was just about done...he went back to the square one more time. Apparently, it's a really rich harvest; an "all hands on deck" kind of harvest. He needs even more servants in the vineyard. And again in the center of town, there were people standing idle. Now with these people...the ones at the end of the train...he has a conversation. "Why are you standing here idle all day?" "No one has hired us," they say. Now we don't know why they haven't been hired. But some who spend their lives studying these kinds of things suggest that maybe it was because they were the kind of people who always got hired last...the weaker ones; the ones who may not look like they can do the job; or the ones who didn't think they could do the job; or who maybe even carry a record that would make it unlikely they'd ever get hired...criminals, or tax-collectors, or other kinds of folks who too often end up being the last chosen and on the outside.

But without question, the landowner doesn't see them that way. He's more focused on the harvest that's got to be brought in. So what are they doing standing around? According to him, they certainly look as if they could be in the fields.

So he tells them, too, to go into the vineyard; and they go. And of all the groups they are the most trusting, because you'll notice there is no word from the vineyard owner about their compensation. They accept the job without any idea of what they'll receive in return.

So the end of the day comes. In the cool of the evening, it's been a good day. Lots got done. Everyone has worked hard...some for a longer period, some for a shorter...but everyone has served well. The ones who began work at 5:00 o'clock come forward first. It's probably been an hour or two that they worked; and certainly to their surprise they receive a full day's wage. And so do those who started at noon and those who started at 9 in the morning.

So here come those who said "yes" first; licking their lips and rubbing their fingers together because if this guy has been this generous with the five o'clockers...well, there'll be a party in town tonight because these early-to-risers are taking home a mighty big worm.

So they look in their pay envelope, and what they got is exactly what they agreed to; exactly what was promised that brought them into the vineyard in the first place. The problem, of course, is that it's what everybody else got.

This does not sit well with the first-arrivers; so the floor boss announces that it isn't fair that the vineyard owner has paid those who came late the same as he paid those who came early. They suffered more; they gave more; so regardless of what was promised them, they should receive more than what the latecomers received. And here our sense of fairness kicks in, because he's kind of got an argument here...

"Well, I gave you what I promised you," says the vineyard owner. "It's yours. Take it. Why is your nose so out of joint that I choose to be generous with others? That's my business; not yours."

Now y'all, there ain't no way this is getting past the Labor Relations Board. There's some kind of grievance to file here. This isn't the way things work. The ones who come early simply ought to get more than the ones who come late. That's just the way it's supposed to be. That's what's fair. Any four year old can see that.

So let me ask you...isn't it beautiful how far beyond "fair" God is...? Isn't it a speechless kind of blessing that God is something much bigger than "fair?" And don't we need God to be more than "fair?"

How does the Kingdom work? Well, it works like this...

God is infinitely generous. I hope we hear that loud and clear in Jesus' story today, because that's what he's saying. God's generosity is beyond what we can fathom. Sit back and contemplate how God has given us the life we live today, how God is the source of our being, and how it is the life God gives is a life for eternity...you know that, we dwell in eternity... and it will blow your mind.

And the Lord is much more interested in the fact that we are part of the Kingdom, than when it is we happened to have arrived. The Lord just doesn't keep track that way. We may keep track that way...which he clearly warns us against here...you know that "my-family's-been-sitting-in-this-pew-since-Jamestown" kind of business. But that doesn't make a bit of difference to Jesus. The Lord's love and grace is amazing; so towards us God is kind of like how we are towards those we love...that like in the Prodigal Son story, at some point we just don't care when they come home...just that they come home.

It's kind of like this... The love of God isn't a single pie that must be cut into infinitely smaller pieces. When it comes to God's love, God just makes more pies. It just multiplies. And it's more than saying God doesn't play favorites. It's that everybody's God's favorite.

The early-birders in this story...they're so human...you just got to love 'em. But there just comes a time when all that kind of stuff that's got their knickers in a twist just doesn't matter; just isn't worth spending any time over.

The simple fact is that God is just really happy whenever we arrive in the vineyard; whenever we're here...and by "here" I don't mean in the sanctuary—though I think that is true, as well—but here in the presence of God's love and mercy and grace. Jesus wants us in the fold; wants you in the fold, and me, and the people driving by this space this morning; it's safe there; and God wants a full Kingdom; and there is rejoicing whether we arrive in the morning, at noonday, or as the sun is setting...because the Lord is always open for business, and just to arrive is enough to make God smile. We always get to come; and we always get to come back; and we always get a friendly greeting from the owner of the vineyard.

God is generous; this story is about grace first; and grace is free gift; and grace is freedom and release, which is what happens when gratitude fills our hearts.

That's how the Kingdom works.

And it works this way, too...It's like a vineyard, to which everyone is called, and in which everyone is needed; because it's a big harvest. Everyone. The early-risers; the late-comers; those who are confident in their abilities; and those who are not; the strong, the weak; the faith warriors, and those who mostly wonder. Everybody. Nobody doesn't qualify; nobody's destiny is idleness in the town square; nobody in the Kingdom is useless, or without purpose or mission. Grace doesn't mean more standing around. It means vineyard service, dirty hands, and a huge harvest. That's faith at work, and a faith that works, and what it's like in the Kingdom.

We all got our insecurities and self-doubts. We're all more aware of our shortcomings and imperfections than we let on. There are a lot of places in life where we get messages about what we're not. And sometimes we even look at others who are better at faking it than we are, and experience envy at how gifted or successful they seem to be. We're human. We do that kind of stuff; we get lost in those kinds of thoughts.

But if one shock in this story is that of how much beyond fair God is, the other shock is that there is a place among the laborers in the vineyard for each one of us...not just the first, but also the last. That's how grace emboldens and empowers us. So I would suggest that the nature of the landowner's invitation in this parable is more than "You must;" but is also "You can."

And we keep preaching that message around here because we all need to hear it. We each need a weekly dose that the word of God is the word “Yes.”

For while it may be that other landowners passed over the five o’clock people because they didn’t think they could do it; the vineyard owner we worship doesn’t look at human beings that way—doesn’t look at you or me or anyone else that way—doesn’t see what we’re not; doesn’t focus on the hitches in our step or what slows us down...but instead sees souls, through the grace of God, made completely capable of being in the field, working side-by-side with the owner of the vineyard, doing what’s next to help bring in the rich harvest and then being given, at the end of the day—no matter when, for us, the day began--a reward so great it can only be described by the word “eternal.” “Well done, good and faithful servant,” is what Jesus says elsewhere. Those words would work here, too.

So maybe you’re an early bird; maybe you’re a latecomer; maybe you’re somewhere in the middle or a little bit of both. To our generous God, it just doesn’t make a difference. For all, there is God’s grace; and to all, there is God’s call into the vineyard. That’s simply the way the Kingdom works...because the Good News is always true in more ways than we can count, that God is most assuredly always more than fair.