

A pastor known for his lengthy sermons, noticed a man get up and leave during the middle of his message. The man returned just before the end of the worship service. Afterwards the pastor asked the man where he had gone. "I went to get a haircut," was the reply. "But," said the pastor, "why didn't you do that before the service?" "Because," the gentleman said, "I didn't need one then."

I promise I won't give a sermon that long today. Mostly because Jesus did not teach in long sermons. The Sermon on the Mount starting in Matthew chapter 5 is his longest sermon. But that is the exception. Most of the time Jesus taught using short stories called parables. For the month of October here at the church we have been looking at the parables of Jesus. Parables are stories used to teach. And Jesus used parables often to teach about God and what God was like and what God was going to do. How was the God that the Hebrews had known for thousands of years going to bring about God's kingdom. Of course Jesus was a big part of bringing the kingdom of God, but the people of Jesus' day as well as us today struggle to understand how all that works. So Jesus used illustrations, or what we call parables, to teach. So today we are looking at the parable of the landowner in Mathew chapter 20. So hear these words from Jesus. The passage is included in your program if you would like to follow along.

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³“About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵So they went. “He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ⁷“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ ⁸“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ ⁹“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ ¹³“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

A lot of the parables of Jesus leave me feeling good and fulfilled. Like the parable of the Good Samaritan. How many of you know that one? Lots of us know what it means to be a good Samaritan, right? To do good for someone else when you didn't have any obligation. To step in and help. This makes us feel good right? In fact the NY Post and ABC news even have good Samaritan sections of their news publications. They report good Samaritan news. We all like the message from that parable, don't we. Well I don't know about you, but I don't get a warm fuzzy feeling from this parable. I don't get a good feeling at the end. This parable leaves me feeling a little confused and even a little put out. This parable doesn't seem fair does it? Any of you get that feeling from this?

Well I think Jesus is drawing us in and making us feel this way on purpose. This parable is crafted and delivered so well. And I think Jesus is purposefully causing us to have mixed feelings or an uneasy feeling about this parable, this lesson about the kingdom of God. So what is it that we are supposed to get out of this?

The parable starts with this: "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." Jesus starts a lot of his parables with this line. And in most cases of this kind of parable the kingdom of heaven is different than how we operate in this world. The kingdom of heaven is different somehow. And then the parable says, after "For the kingdom of heaven is like" it says "a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard." Now in a parable one of the things we have to figure out is who represents who in the story. In this case the landowner is God. That's pretty clear right? So the first point here is that God is the first one with any action in the story. The landowner goes and seeks out workers. They don't come to him. The landowner finds them. And that's the first point. God seeks humanity, us out, not the other way around. God took the initiative in this whole thing we call life. God created and God seeks us out. The landowner says come, work for me. God says come, be part of my plan.

And notice something important; the landowner does not do this just once. He goes out over and over again seeking out workers for his vineyard. Verse 1 he goes out early in the morning, then verse 3 he goes out at 9AM, then verse 5 he goes out again at noon and at 3PM. And then in verse 6 he goes out again at 5PM, when the work day is almost over, and he seeks out more. Again and again he seeks out workers. This is good news for us. God does not seek us out just once and then, if we miss it or don't get it, that's it. God wants us so much that God seeks us out over and over again. And notice some don't join in working in the vineyard until the, what we would call the 11th hour. When there is only one hour of work left. Folks there is hope for us no matter what stage of life we are in. It may be the 11th hour for you, but that is OK. God is still seeking you out.

So the landowner goes out and seeks workers throughout the day. And each time gets more workers to go work in the vineyard. And did you notice what the workers hired late in the day

said? Starting in verse 6 Jesus says this: “ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ”⁷ “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’” The workers no one else hired, this landowner hires. These workers are hanging out because no one would hire them. So this landowner, even though it is 5PM and very little time left for work, this landowner hires them.

Jesus is telling us something about how God works. God seeks us out not only over and over again. God seeks us out even if everyone else in this life seems to have passed us over. You may be the one no one would hire. No one would befriend. No one would call important. But God sees your value when others do not. This landowner is different isn't he. He hires the workers no one else would hire and he hires them at the end of the day when there is only about an hour left to work. This landowner, in some ways, makes no sense. But that's the point. God works differently. God values us based on different criteria than the rest of the world. And here God seeks us out to the 11th hour and God seeks out everyone, even the ones that are not valued by others.

So this landowner has found all these workers throughout the day and now it is time to pay up. Verse 8 Jesus says this: “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’” Now this is where Jesus sets us up. The order in which he pays them. Remember at the beginning of the parable, when the landowner hires workers early in the morning, they agree to a day's wage. A denarius which would have been a day's wages. So the foreman starts paying them and he pays the guy hired at 5PM a denarius. And then the same for the ones hired at 3PM and noon and so on. So the workers that have been there since 6AM are expecting they will get paid more. Now why? Why do they think they are going to get paid more? Because that is how we think. We think our relationship with God is about us and what we do. That is human thinking, isn't it?

A man died and went to heaven. He was met at the Pearly Gates by St. Peter who led him down the golden streets. They passed stately homes and beautiful mansions until they came to the end of the street where they stopped in front of a rundown cabin. The man asked St. Peter why he got a hut when there were so many mansions he could live in. St. Peter replied, “I did the best with the money you sent us.”

This is how we think isn't it. We think we earn or work or buy our status with God. We think how hard we work will reflect on how good our relationship is with God. That somehow WE do it. But the point of this parable by Jesus is that we don't do it. God does it. The landowner seeks out the workers, not the other way around. And the landowner is gracious to all of the workers, whether they worked an hour or 9 hours. The work was the landowners to offer and so

was the pay. It was never about how much work the workers did. It was simply about them responding to the landowner.

So to get to the sermon title today. I asked a question. Is God fair? We human beings tend to like things that are fair. This is probably why on my first reading of this parable I was a little off. But I am here to tell you this morning that God is not fair. And that is good news. Think about it. Did the landowner have to seek out all of those workers? No. He could have stuck with the ones he got in the morning. The landowner went the extra mile to find more and more. Does God have to seek us out more than once? No. Does God have to call us to join in his kingdom more than once? No. But he does. God is not fair. God does not leave us stuck in our sinful selves unable to be saved. That would be fair. You know the Old Testament is the story of God's relationship with the Hebrew people. He chose a nation, God sought out a group of people and said you will be my people. And what did they do? The same thing any of us would have done. They rejected God, over and over and over again. What would have been fair would have been for God to say, ok enough of this. I'm done. That would have been fair.

But not only does God not give up, God sends Jesus to try to save all of us anyway. And that is the story Jesus is telling here. He is telling the disciples and us that God is going to pursue us even though we don't deserve it. And the pay that the workers got, the denarius, that represents the grace we receive from God. The grace we are promised in the Bible. And notice the grace we receive from God is not about how hard we worked for it. In the parable the landowner gives them all the same amount of grace, no matter how long they worked. We are all offered the same amount of grace from God, whether we have followed Jesus from the age of 10 or are just meeting God for the first time now. And the landowner is not shortchanging the workers that started early. He gives them what he promised. God promises that if we come to him through Jesus Christ we can be part of the kingdom. John 3:16 tells us that "For God so loved the world" the world, not just certain people, God so loved the world "that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The workers that came early were treated fairly. And they would not have had the job in the first place if the landowner had not gone and found them and invited them to work. This is not about what they did. This is about what God does. And when it comes to us, and what we do and do not do, God is not fair. And we should praise God for that.

A Franciscan Friar named Daniel Horan wrote a book titled *God is not Fair and other reasons for gratitude*. In this book Horan demonstrates that "the Christian life is most often focused on the counterintuitive and gratuitous foolishness of God's love revealed in the healing of the broken and brokenhearted, forgiving the unforgiveable, and loving the unlovable." God is not fair, and that is a good thing.

You know, when we look at passages in the Bible. We do need to take into consideration the audience that heard these teachings. Who was this parable meant for and why? Well in the case of this parable, this passage comes after a conversation at the end of Matthew chapter 19, right before this parable, between Jesus and the disciples about who will enter eternal life and how. The disciples are trying to figure out who is going to get into heaven. Jesus has just told them that someone who loves their money more than God will not enter. And then the disciples point out to Jesus that they left everything for him. They have worked really hard. What about them? And then Jesus tells them this story. So Jesus was answering their question about earning their way into heaven. And his point is that you don't earn your way into heaven. It is all about what God does. What the landowner does.

This begs to ask the question, are we expecting something because of our doing? There are two problems with doing this and they come up at the end of the parable. First, the workers that started early grumble when they don't get more than the others. Their gratitude for a job and for the promised pay for that job gets lost. They complain instead. When we place expectations on God and then don't get things the way we want, we may be tempted to complain. Friends we have nothing to complain about when it comes to the gift of salvation. God's grace is offered to us not because of anything we do. God seeks us out, God invites us to the vineyard, and God gives us what God has promised. There is nothing to complain about in that scenario. But we often place expectations on God that are unfair, that don't meet with God's plan. And we complain about it, or even move away from God because of it. And that would be tragic. Go to the God that invites you and receive God's grace in your life.

The other problem with expecting God to respond to our doing is we also then expect more for ourselves than others. We expect more blessings because we worked harder. The landowner even says it in the end of the parable, in verse 15 he says this: "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Envious because God is generous. You know we do not know what the kingdom of heaven will look like. But I bet all of us can think of someone that we don't think God will save. All of us, including me, have probably met someone that we can't imagine God saving. But that's not our call. We have no right to be envious of God's generosity. Again, God is not fair and that is a good thing.

So who are you in the parable? Are you the worker that started early and expects more than others? Are you the worker that showed up at the 11th hour and was surprised to receive a says wage? Are you one of the workers that no one else would hire and you were hanging out having lost hope when the landowner (God) came along? There is a place for all of us in here. And when the disciples ask Jesus about who is going to be number one in heaven, Jesus answers with this parable. He teaches them that your rank and your status and how hard you work is not what causes you to enter the kingdom of God. None of that matters when it comes to a relationship with God. It is responding to the landowner that matters. Responding to God.

God does everything else. No, it is not fair. It is much much better than fair. The landowner is seeking each and every one of you, no matter who you are or what you have done. It is not fair. But it is awesome. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.