

Sunday October 23rd, 2022

Matthew 20:1-16
“Late to the Party”

I ran across an interesting piece from the old Dear Abby advice column. This is what it said, “Dear Abby: My husband has always been very close to his mother, and she has never cared much for me. I asked my husband if I was drowning, and his mother was drowning, which one would he save? He said, “My mother, because I owe her more.” I am so terribly hurt, Abby. What shall I do? Signed Arlene” Abby wrote back, “Dear Arlene: Learn to swim.”

Perhaps it doesn't seem fair that this poor wife is expendable to her husband if a choice had to be made between herself and her mother-in-law. All human beings seem to have a very strong sense of fairness; we believe that everyone should get their rightful due in life. And when we feel we have been short changed, we go to great lengths to protest and demand restitution. Like the story Red Skelton used to tell, about a minister who went to see a parishioner's husband.

The minister came to chastise the husband for spending far too much time tinkering with his new car. “If I were you,” asserted the clergyman, “I'd put my wife before my car.” “I'd sure like to,” the husband sighed, “but I'm afraid someone might catch me at it.” Fair; what is fair? Who determines what is fair? Who said life was fair? So, why do we have this strong desire to see everything set out fairly among people?

We want the pie divided fairly. The cookies shared evenly. Justice in our courts applied without prejudice. If we all agree that things should be fair, why aren't they? None of us is naïve enough to believe everyone enjoys the same health, wealth, or privilege. We might even want to argue that this lack of desired fairness is a result of the fall, or the sinfulness of this world. Things would be fair, we think, if people did not: cheat, or steal, or harm others. Surely though when God steps in, things will be fair.

At least in terms of spiritual matters, those of us who have given more of ourselves to the Kingdom of God should by all measure of fairness, receive more of a blessing from God. Through our eyes; men and women who have given everything for the Kingdom of God, like missionaries for example, will receive a huge reward. While those who have come to the party later in life, or have not given much of themselves; will receive little.

Peter must have been thinking this way in Matthew 19, after Jesus made the demand that the rich young ruler sell everything he had, and give it to the poor, in order to become his disciple. Jesus, reflecting on this sad encounter said that it was very hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. “Easier”, Jesus said, “For a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich person to get into heaven.”

The disciples were astounded. This went against their understanding of the Kingdom of God. It was their common understanding, that if you were rich, you must have done some great thing for God, and are now being blessed. So, how could the rich be excluded? They asked, “Then who in the world can be saved?” If people who have been clearly blessed in this life with material goods etc. are not guaranteed a spot in the Kingdom, then who is?

Sunday October 23rd, 2022

Jesus responded, “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible.” In other words, our salvation depends on God’s grace, not on our effort. The implications of this sunk in quickly with the disciples, and therefore Peter said, “We’ve given up everything to follow you. What will we get out of it? What’s my just desserts?”

In other words; Peter is looking to understand the fairness equation of this salvation transaction. If the rich cannot get in easily, nor can those who will not leave their past life behind like the rich young ruler, surely, we twelve disciples who have sacrificed much, are on the road to great rewards. So, it comes down to this. How can we tell who is in the Kingdom of God, and who is not, without referencing their material rewards?

To shed some light on the subject, Jesus tells another parable, and notice please that this parable is spoken directly to the disciples, to those closest to him. Jesus begins by describing the Kingdom of God as like the owner of a vineyard. Just like right now in the Niagara region of this province, the grapes were ready to be harvested. But in those days, there were no mechanical pickers, so the valuable grapes had to be hand-picked.

At sunrise, the owner agreed with some workers to pay them a day’s wages, or one denarii for their help in picking the grapes, and these workers agreed to work for that pay. But the grape crop was huge, and grapes are quite perishable, so the vineyard owner went out and found workers at nine o’clock. These were workers who were just milling around in the marketplace hoping to find work. This was a common practice in those days for labourers. Employers knew they could find extra workers at the market, just like you could find some olives.

The owner agreed to pay these new workers whatever was right at the end of the day. Notice he never gave them an amount. But still, there was too many grapes for the workers already hired to handle, so the owner went out again at noon, at 3 o’clock, and did the same thing. At five o’clock he was still going about the marketplace, and saw still more workers just standing around. “Why haven’t you been working today?” he asked.

They replied, “Because no one hired us.” So, these people the vineyard owner also sent out to the fields. At the very end of the day, meaning dusk, the foreman was told to call all the workers into the house in order to pay them. The owner began with those workers he hired last, and surprisingly paid them a full day’s wages even though they had only worked briefly. And so, this, pay pattern, continued until those hired at the beginning of the day came forward. Holding out their hands, they also received the same amount; one denarii.

Stunned, these workers who had toiled in the hot sun all day raised a protest. They were outraged at the unfairness of what the owner had done. How, in any sense of accounting does a person who worked one hour deserve the same amount of wages, as those who worked all day? I can just see Buzz Hargrove the former head of the CAW having a fit over such a turn of events. Maybe the vineyard owner’s pay practices would be enough to call a strike, or boycott these particular grapes, or the wine made from them.

The parable continues by saying that the owner spoke to one of them, maybe the union steward, or the one who was most vocal in his protest.

Sunday October 23rd, 2022

“Friend, I haven’t been unfair! Didn’t you agree to work all day for the usual wage?” These full day employees were not cheated. They were given exactly what they agreed to receive for their labour. I am sure that this turn of events has spoiled any good will these first employees had. They must have wondered about the sanity of their employer. They must have felt they were being punished, or their labour was not valued.

Morale among this group would have been atrocious. This vineyard owner was not the man any reasonable person would want to work for. In this vineyard, length of service, or tenure, has no value. All the workers are treated the same, even if the casual observer can tell not all workers contributed the same level of effort.

In terms of employment law this seems ridiculous, but this isn’t really about a vineyard, is it. Jesus said that this owner of the vineyard is like the Kingdom of Heaven. He is speaking directly to Peter who represents the one spokesman for the disgruntled workers. Yes, Peter, you have left your family, friends, and your livelihood to follow me. You are the workers called by me at the very beginning of my ministry. But “the harvest is plentiful and the workers are few.” (John 4:35-38)

So much is at stake in the work of the Kingdom of Heaven, that every worker, no matter when they join in the mission, is valuable. Further, it is important, Jesus is stating, that we understand that whatever rewards we receive for putting our: hearts, hands, and minds to the work of Christ, comes not because of our efforts, but because of the grace of God. Notice what the vineyard owner said, *“I wanted to pay the last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be angry because I am kind?”* (Vs. 14-15)

In Kingdom of Heaven terms: rewards, blessings, good things, are God’s; and he can distribute them as he sees fit. How can anyone get angry, when someone is blessed by grace, when they haven’t really, in our estimation, done anything for the Kingdom of God? How soon we forget that we too are saved by grace and not by works? Our works, even those done in faith, have no influence in the dispensing of God’s love and grace upon ourselves, or anyone else.

Perhaps a story will help explain this better. In the spring of 2002, Denise Banderman of Hannibal Missouri, left work early so she could have some extra uninterrupted study time before her final exam in the Youth Ministry class she was taking at Hannibal-LaGrange College in Missouri. When Denise got to the classroom, she could see her classmates doing their best to study hard to the last minute.

The teacher came in and said he would review with the class before the test. Most of his review came right from the study guide, but there were some things he was reviewing that Denise had never heard. When questioned about it, he said they were in the book and they were responsible for everything in the book. The class couldn’t argue with that. Finally, it came time for the test.

“Leave them face down on the desk until everyone has one, and I’ll tell you to start”, the professor Dr. Tom Hufty, instructed. When the class turned their papers over, they were astonished to find that every answer on the test was filled in. Their names were even on the tests in red ink.

Sunday October 23rd, 2022

The bottom of the last page read, “This is the end of the exam. All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an A on the final exam.

The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get an A. You have just experienced grace.” Dr. Hufty then went around the room and asked each student individually, “What is your grade? Did you deserve the grade you are receiving? How much did all your studying for this exam help you achieve your final grade?”

Then he said, “Some things you learn from lectures, some things you learn from research, but some things you can only learn from experience. You’ve just experienced grace. One hundred years from now, if you know Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, your name will be written down in a book, and you will have had nothing to do with writing it there. That will be the ultimate grace experience.”

What did we do to experience the grace of God? Nothing! So, to believe that all our toiling in the vineyard has somehow promoted us up the ladder in God’s Kingdom, is wrong. The Kingdom of God doesn’t work that way. If God were truly fair to us, the results would be truly terrifying. Our so-called righteous deeds are like filthy rags according to Isaiah 64:6.

So, turning to Peter, Jesus is saying, “Peter, I know what you have done for the Kingdom and even what you are going to do in the future, but that does not make you more valuable than anyone else. Yes, Peter there are rewards that come from following me, but you haven’t earned them, I have given them to you as free gifts; as grace.” One thing that grabs me in this parable is that the only ones who complained, were the workers who toiled all day.

Who in this parable do you believe was the most grateful for their wages? I am sure it was the workers hired at the last hour. These were workers who knew that the time for labour was nearing an end. “No one has hired us!” Imagine their joy at getting an opportunity to earn something to take home to their families. Maybe that is our problem, we have somehow lost the focus and gratitude grace brings to our lives.

Maybe we have been covered by grace so long that we forget what a precious gift it is. Rev. Chuck Kent has reminded us all of how precious grace is, when he began a unique ministry called “Last Minute Ministry”. It is a ministry that focuses on reaching out to people who are terminally ill, or as Rev. Kent calls it, “people in their eleventh hour”. This parable we read this morning is the basis of this ministry, as people very near to death are given opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel.

The ministry began when a friend of Rev. Kent’s asked him to visit his dying 92-year-old grandfather in the hospital. The elderly man was an agnostic. Rev. Kent shared this parable of the vineyard owner who hired people at the last hour. This grandfather was in his eleventh hour and that day he prayed to accept Christ. A week later, Rev. Kent preached on this same text at the funeral of the grandfather, and hundreds more heard the same invitation.

Sunday October 23rd, 2022

After the funeral one of the grandfather's daughters pointed out there were other terminally ill people on that same hospital floor who needed that same message. So, Rev. Kent received permission from the hospital to visit these people and give them the same opportunity. He went room to room, sharing the story of the vineyard owner and 8 of the 15 patients he talked to accepted Christ that first day.

During one of his visits Rev. Kent visited a man who was comatose and had only hours to live. The man was unable to speak or open his eyes. Instead, Rev. Kent lead him in the prayer of salvation by having the man squeeze his hand to affirm his desire to be saved. Two hours later the man died.

Rev. Kent describing why this ministry is so effective states, "People on the terminal floor are a lot more realistic about eternity." (From Elizabeth Diffin, "Eleventh Hour Ministry", Leadership Journal Spring 2006, p. 75) Well guess what? We are all on the terminal floor. Yes, some of us will be there longer than others, but the end of our journey is assured. The good news is that it doesn't matter when you join God's Kingdom just as long as you do join.

And unlike in the parable when those eleventh-hour labourers said no one hired them, today Christ has given us all an invitation to come and labour in his vineyard. So, what is fair? If things were done fairly, God would have written us off long ago. But God did something that was patently unfair; something that was merciful and full of grace. God sent his only Son to die for our sins.

Makes you think that thankfully some things in life are not fair.