

Title: *A Fair Day's Wage*

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

The battle cry of labor movements and revolutions around the world is “a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work.” That seems so right, so basic, so foundational, who could have a problem with it. No one likes getting stiffed when it comes to getting what you think you’ve got coming to you. Right is right and fair is fair.

There are grievance procedures and accounting processes to make sure that everyone gets what’s coming to them. The irony of it is that a lot of movements toward fair hiring practices and equal treatment of everyone, have a Christian impulse behind them.

Isn’t it ironic then when Jesus tells a story and the point is something that flies in the face of justice for all and a fair shake for everyone.

As Jesus tells the parable, it’s pretty straightforward and easy to grasp. There’s not a lot of Greek exegesis required, not a lot of background to work through. It’s a scene that we can all grasp and understand.

It’s harvest time and a man needs some laborers to come gather in the harvest. The text doesn’t explicitly say, “Harvest, but we can surmise that’s what’s going on here, even though that is not essential to the meaning of the story. The point is the man needed some work done, so he went to the place in town where there was an ample supply of labor – a place where people who maybe didn’t have steady work could go and hope that they might be hired for the day.

You could figure that the ones who were the most desperate, most willing to work, the ones with the best attitude that you would most like to hire would be there bright and early. 6:00 a.m. They weren’t going to take any chances; they weren’t going to miss any opportunities; they weren’t going to take anything for granted.

A man comes up and says, “I’ve got a lot of work that I need done. I’ll give you a denarius for the day’s work. That seemed fair. That was about the going rate for a day laborer. The workers readily agreed, no problem. They were probably happy to earn a little bit of money.

About 9:00 a.m., the owner checks out the progress that the workers are making and he thinks to himself, “We’re not going to get done today at this rate. I’d better go back and see if there are some more guys who can help us out.” So he goes and hires some more guys only this time, he doesn’t promise them a denarius. He just says, “I’ll pay you whatever’s right.” The workers willingly agreed to go.

As I was thinking about this, the thought struck me. Maybe those early workers weren’t all they cracked up to be. Maybe the vineyard owner said, “I thought these guys would do better than this. They’re not getting the job done. I’d better bring in some more people.” We just assume that the earlybirds were the go-getters and the best workers and the most responsible, but that’s not necessarily the case. Maybe they weren’t getting the job done and the land owner knew it. Just speculating.

If the earlybirds weren't getting the job done, then neither were the not-quite-so-early birds, the 9:00'ers. He does the same thing at the 6th hour, which would be high noon. Then at 3:00 p.m. and then at 5:00 p.m. His agreement with all the laborers is either, "I will pay you a denarius," which is the going wage for a day laborer, or I will pay you what is right.

It would be easy to denigrate the folks who came later in the day and say that they layed around in bed until noon before finally deciding to get their lazy rear ends out there and do some work. That's possible, but it's also possible that they had their own smaller vineyards they had to tend to first and then were still wanting to do some work to pick up some extra cash to take care of their families.

Even after going steadily throughout the day, there is still work to be done so even at 5:00 when most people are thinking about knocking off for the day and going home, he's out there in the square where the laborers are still hoping someone will hire them and this time, he almost sounds impatient with them. What are you still doing out here instead of working. Why have you been standing here all day instead of working?

They reply, "Because no one has hired us." The way it's set up it makes you think, "Yeah, and I know why no one's hired them." They seem almost kind of whiney. Like maybe they give up too easy and don't really mind taking no for an answer.

The vineyard owner is a nice guy and he still has work that he needs done and he's willing to pay whatever it costs to get the work done, even if there are only a couple more hours to work.

Now the scene shifts and it is evening and it's payday. We're about to find out how nice a guy the vineyard owner really is.

Before we get there though, let me back up for a minute. The basic meaning – the scandalous meaning – is that God is a God of grace and in a kingdom governed by grace, we can't always expect things to be fair because we get something better. Grace is a very important teaching of this parable and we'll look at that in greater depth in a moment

The parable is framed with the statement about the last being first and the first being last. Matthew 19:30 says, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." Then when Jesus gives a summary statement in 20:16 where he's summarizing the point of the parable, he says, "So the last will be first and the first will be last."

Jesus has just encountered the rich young ruler who asked what good thing he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him, "Go. Sell your possessions, give to the poor and come follow me."

The young man went away sad because he had great wealth. That rocked the world of the disciples because they thought the great wealth was a sign of God's favor – of some moral superiority on his part. They may have had visions of what kind of lifestyle they could all have if they had him bankrolling their endeavor.

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." ²⁴

Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The disciples couldn't believe this. They asked, “If that's the case just who can be saved?” And Peter adds, “We've left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

Jesus said to him, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Then when Jesus finishes telling the story, he says, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

It's to amplify that point that Jesus tells the parable. You may say that's where the landowner makes his mistake – he doles out the wages and he pays everyone the same. If he had paid those who had been there the longest first, they would have taken their pay and gone home content that they had put in a full day's work and gotten what they had bargained for.

By reversing the order, the landowner stirs up a bit of a scandal because those who had put in 11 or 12 hours of work see that these johnny-come-latelys who didn't work nearly as hard as they did are getting the same pay. You don't have to be a union organizer to get a little ticked off about that. I've never really run a business and been the one to sign off on the paychecks, but it seems that if you want to keep your employees happy, and you want to keep them loyal to you, you don't pull stunts like this – just an unfair pay scale and then making sure those who have been working the hardest for you know just how unjust the pay scale really is.

In the realm of sports superstars, Mike Murphy plays a small but essential role for his pro baseball team, the San Francisco Giants. Recently, he helped the Giants win their first World Series in 52 years, and Mike was on the job for the entire 52-year journey. But you won't find his name on the scoreboard. You won't see him endorsing new products for millions of dollars per advertisement. He'll never make it into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

“Murph,” as they call him, has been with the team since 1958, starting as the team's batboy, before moving up to his roles as the clubhouse attendant and finally the equipment manager. Throughout his 52 years of faithful service, Murph has worked behind the scenes, cleaning shoes and ordering bats, so his much more famous teammates could achieve success. According to an article in *The New York Times*, “If anyone embodies the 52-year endurance test the San Francisco Giants underwent to reach baseball's summit, it is Mike Murphy.” That's one reason why the owner of the team handed the World Series trophy to Murphy so he could present it to his ecstatic teammates. At some point during the wild post-game celebration the reported noted, “[Murphy] turned to a clubhouse attendant and pointed to some bags. There was equipment to be loaded on to a truck Murphy was back at work.”

The scene in the parable is that evening comes and the owner says to his foreman, “Call

in all my men and give them their wages, beginning with the last hired and going on to the first.” That’s unusual for us. We would probably make a pay envelope for everyone and write their name on it so that no one would know how much was on everyone’s check on the inside of the envelope and it wouldn’t matter in what order they lined up.

He makes a deliberate point of making sure everyone knows that the last hired who only worked a couple of hours will get the same pay as everyone else and that they will get paid first. They pay in cash and they line up last hired, first paid. When they see the guys who were only there for a couple of hours getting a denarius. The guys who had been out there all day busting their tail expected to get a lot more. They thought they would make out like bandits. They each got just the same as the others who hadn’t worked nearly as hard as they had.

They didn’t just let it go without saying anything. They grumbled. They said, “These men who were hired last only worked on hour and you’ve made them equal to us. We’re the ones who’ve been out here all day in the heat busting it for you. You think we’ll ever come back and work for you any more, you cheapskate?”

They don’t call him a cheapskate, but that’s probably what they’re thinking. This isn’t unfair. I’m paying you what we agreed to pay you. You got paid, you can go on home now. I can do what I want to do with my own money and I can be generous with my own money if I want to. That is an interesting expression that is used for envious. It literally reads, “Is your eye evil, or poor, or sick because I am generous.” You think I’m being cheap toward you when I’m actually being generous toward the guys who weren’t here as long as you.

So the last will be first, and the first will be last. That’s the application Jesus makes to this story. Last hired, first paid. I’ve always interpreted this parable as being about grace. It’s all about God’s grace. We get what we get because of God’s grace. We don’t have any right to make demands of him. God’s grace is amazing, it is abundant, it is free and it is given only because of the love in God’s heart. That’s what grace is. It is the undeserved, unmerited favor of God.

The laborers were viewing their pay as their wages. Not an unreasonable expectation when you’ve been working hard all day and you were hired with the expectation of receiving a fair wage. It still was dependent upon the landowner having work. Maybe the guys who weren’t hired until later in the day weren’t hired because no one else was hiring. At least this man had work for them to do.

Let’s take this over into the spiritual realm, though. If the landowner represents God and the parable tells us what we can expect from him when our day is done, it is God’s grace. When you serve the Lord do you serve him out of the joy in your heart and the gratitude for your salvation, or are you simply doing what you do with the expectation that you’ll get your wages one day?

In his book *The Prodigal God*, best-selling author and pastor Timothy Keller offers the following story to illustrate self-centered giving:

Once upon a time there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. So he took it to his

king and said, “My Lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” The king was touched and discerned the man's heart, so as [the gardener] turned to go the king said, “Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all.” And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing. But there was a nobleman at the king's court who overheard all this. And he said, “My! If that is what you get for a *carrot*—what if you gave the king something better?” So the next day the nobleman came before the king and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, “My lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I have ever bred or ever will. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” But the king discerned his heart and said thank you, and took the horse and merely dismissed him. The nobleman was perplexed. So the king said, “Let me explain. That gardener was giving *me* the carrot, but you were giving *yourself* the horse.”

The last will be first and the first will be last. I think of that verse most often at church dinners. That's why I try not to be first in line. Partly because it's bad form for the Pastor always to be first, but also it's to show patience, take what's left, trust that there will be plenty and I don't have to fret over being the first one to go through the line. Jesus told the religious people of his day that the tax collectors and the prostitutes would enter the kingdom ahead of them. In that case, those who thought they would be first weren't anywhere near the party.

Is there any other wage beside heaven? Can you get any more or any less wage than heaven? I don't like the prospect of a sermon that scolds people for wanting a fair wage for a fair day's work, that's really not what's going on here. The gracious promise of this parable is that it's never too late for you. As long as you're living and breathing and God's Spirit is working on your heart, it's never too late to give your heart to Jesus. Have you ever thought, “Too late. I've missed it. No hope for me.”

Because of God's grace, it's never too late.

Preached at Salem Avenue. February 27, 2011 a.m.