

Dear friends in Christ!

Matthew 20.1-16

We could all tell our own version and experience of this parable. We know people who, in our not so humble opinion, neither earned nor deserved what they got; a job, a promotion, a raise, recognition, happiness, success. That we worked longer and tried harder seemed to make no difference. More often than not we view the world, ourselves, and others through the lens of fairness rather than grace, the exact opposite of how God views the world and our lives.

What happens when divine goodness trumps human fairness? You get today's parable. Today's parable suggests wages and grace stand in opposition to each other. They are two opposing world views. The degree to which this parable strikes us as unfair is the degree to which our life and world view is wage based. A wage based world view allows little room for grace in our own lives or the lives of others.

Grace is dangerous. It reverses business as usual. "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." That's not how a wage based society works. The world says the last are last and the first are first because they deserve it. It's what is fair. Our understanding of fairness, however, does not seem to have priority in the kingdom of heaven where grace is the rule not the exception. Grace looks beyond our productivity, our appearance, our dress, our race or ethnicity, our accomplishments, our failures. Grace recognizes there is more to you and who you are than what you have done or left undone.

Grace reminds us that we are not nearly as self-sufficient, deserving, or independent as a wage based society would like us to believe. Neither is our worth determined by our productivity or usefulness to another. Grace does not justify or excuse discrimination, unfairness, or oppression. To the contrary it holds before us the truth that each person is more than their behavior, their looks, their accomplishments, or their failures.

The first hired got what they bargained for. The later hired workers, those who come at 9:00 a.m., noon, 3:00 p.m., even 5:00 p.m., did not, however, negotiate for the usual daily wage. They entered the vineyard trusting they would be paid "whatever is right." Whatever is right is not determined by the first hired or by a wage based society but by the goodness of the landowner. These later hired workers received more than they earned, more than they deserved, more than they had a right to ask or hope for. That's just what God does. "Whatever is right" isn't about fairness but about grace.

Why settle for the usual daily wage when God wants to give you "whatever is right" for your life, your needs, your salvation? "Whatever is right" will always be more than fair, more than we could ask or imagine. Yet we sometimes trust a wage based life more than we trust grace. In so doing we deny ourselves and others the life God wants to give. So how might we begin to move from a wage based life to the vineyard of grace?

Stop comparing yourself and your life to others and you will create room for grace to emerge. Refuse to compete in such a way that someone must lose for you to win. Trust that in God's world there is enough for everyone. Let go of expectations based on what you think you or others deserve. Give God the freedom to pay whatever is right knowing that God's ways are not your ways. Make no judgments of yourself or others. That is the way of grace, the way of God.

Imagine if we all let go of those four things; comparison, competition, expectation, and judgment. Your life would be God-filled, you would make space for the life of another to be God-filled, and the world would, the parable tells us, look a lot like the kingdom of heaven.