

***“Do You Think It’s Fair...?”***

***Matthew 20:1-16***

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***Hamden Plains United Methodist Church, Hamden, Connecticut***

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Almost from the time she could talk, Karen, our youngest daughter, would stand in front of us with her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face and very emphatically ask, “Do you think it’s fair...?”. We knew that whatever followed, the correct response was an equally emphatic “No.” Of the countless number of times we were asked this question, there is one that still makes me smile. When Karen was just six years old, she came home from her riding lesson quite agitated. Her questions went something like this: “Do you think it’s fair that when it’s rainy for a few days, the stallions get to go out in the fields, but the mares don’t?” Do you think it’s fair that they don’t let them take turns?” Fair, maybe not. Sensible, definitely yes. I know enough about the males of a species to know that everyone is better off when they are given the opportunity to burn off some of their energy.

Leaving the barnyard for the vineyard, in today’s gospel we heard about a landowner who went out early in the morning and hired workers for his vineyard, telling them how much he would pay for that day’s work. He went out again at 9:00am, noon, 3:00pm, and 5:00pm and hired more workers, with the promise to pay “whatever is right”. At the end of day, he called his workers to him and paid them their wages, beginning with the last hired and going on to the first. He gave them **all** a denarius, the usual daily wage for a day worker. You can just imagine the amount of grumbling by the workers after that. Do **you** think it’s fair that the those who worked the whole day were paid the same amount as those who worked only a short time?

I know my grandmother certainly did not. On Sunday mornings, my father took his Bible off the living room shelf and went to mass at the Catholic church. My mother took my brother and me up the hill to the Baptist church. Grandma stayed home and had dinner ready for us when we all returned. She was a wonderful cook, so I never questioned the arrangement or even gave it much thought. At some point, however, I learned that when she was younger, she went to church and was even very active in the Women’s League. One day, someone did something to offend her, and that was the end of her church-going for all time. Needless to say, in order to enjoy her delicious food, our Sunday School and worship service experiences were not a topic of conversation at our Sunday meals. Because she also allowed her hurt feelings to affect her relationship with God, the only times I remember Grandma talking about

anything spiritual was when she railed against this parable. Perhaps it was from her great grandmother that our Karen inherited a need for everything to be fair, because Grandma simply could not see how the actions of the landowner could be fair or right on any level, including the spiritual.

It is easy to see why she thought the way she did. The landowner's actions not only don't seem fair, but they also don't seem to make much sense. Why did he take time from his day to make repeated trips to hire just a few workers at a time? Why did he pay all his workers the same wages when he could have saved a great deal of money by paying them for only the time they worked? Why did he start with the last worker and end with the first? Didn't he know there would be grumbling? Didn't he want to be fair to his workers?

The final words of this passage from Matthew reads, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Even without the heading "The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard" that is found in many Bibles, when we read these words we see how similar they are to the Beatitudes and know this is not just a story of a landowner and his laborers, but a teaching of Jesus. The questions we need to ask, therefore, are not the ones mentioned above, but the spiritual questions of, "What did Jesus want the people to learn through this parable? What does he want **us** to learn?"

There is more than one lesson to be gleaned from the parables of Jesus, and "The Workers in the Vineyard," is no exception. One understanding of this parable is that Jesus was speaking to the people about God's grace. Because God's grace is one of those concepts that I find difficult to explain or even fully understand, I went to one of the best theological resources to find a clear definition: I Googled it. The first definition was a familiar one: unmerited favor. Not finding that, or other Googled definitions, satisfactory, I went to a second theological resource: Wikipedia. There I found John Wesley's detailed explanation of the three types of grace, which was way too much for my purposes. Back to Google I went, where I finally found a definition that gave me some clarity, "grace is the love and mercy given to us by God because He desires us to have it, not because of anything we have done to earn it".

Far more than being fair, God is gracious (giving us not what we deserve, but what we need), merciful (not giving us the punishment we do deserve), just (morally consistent), and righteous. As His beloved children, grace is God's gift to us. As with other gifts that we are given, we only have to accept it. Unlike other gifts, however, grace is not ours to keep, but to pass on. Like the water in the fountain on the table before you, God intends that as His grace flows so freely to us, it will flow from us to others.

When there are circumstances that just trying to be fair is a struggle, the idea of extending grace is daunting, but the rewards are great. For example, after 50 years, one month, and 12 days, I can attest that marriage is rarely, if ever, a fair 50/50 partnership. Sometimes it's 60/40, sometimes 25/75, and sometimes even 1/99. I must confess that when it comes to an imbalance like 25/75, when I am giving the 25 percent, and Bob is giving the 75 percent, it seems fair to me. On the other hand, when the reverse is true, you just might hear some grumbling! It may not be fair much of the time, but a marriage works when its partners receive God's grace and extend it to each other in turn.

If it is difficult to be gracious in a relationship based on love, how much more difficult it is with those we do not love or even like. However difficult it might be, extending grace is not just something we might want to consider doing; it is an integral part of Jesus' command that we "Love one another," as He has loved us (John 13:34). The Golden Rule tells us to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Matthew 7:12). We can only imagine the changes that would take place in our relationships, our communities, our nation, and our world if each one of us followed these words of Jesus to the best of our ability. Two sentences from Jill Jackson Miller and Sy Miller's hymn of 1955 also offer advice for bringing about this kind of change: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

There isn't a day that goes by that we don't hear reports of acts of anger and violence taking place somewhere in our nation. Although not all, so many are the result of the racial, political, human sexuality, and COVID-19 issues that we are facing today. As Christians, the road to peace on earth can, and must, begin with us. The first step is to understand why we must go beyond being fair to being gracious. Even when we make every effort to be fair, we are often unsuccessful, because what seems fair to one person, may not seem fair to another. Another reason our efforts may be thwarted, is that in order to ensure fairness, we must look at both people and their circumstances. Although it is necessary that we do so in order to determine what is fair, when we start looking at people rather than keeping our eyes on God himself, it is almost inevitable that our judgment becomes clouded, making it more difficult to see, understand, and follow what He would have us do.

Perhaps the best reason to make a change in what we are doing, is that this just isn't working. We do not need to look far to see evidence that proves this statement to be true. In recent months, instead of the intended fair treatment, actions taken to move towards equality for all have actually created even greater divisiveness. One group is pitted against another group, neither one is happy with their situation, and both are unhappy with government and its officials. Disagreements over politics and COVID-19, lead to

broken friendships and even violence. All these are perfect examples of why we need God's grace during difficult times.

God is always gracious. He does not decide when or if he will show us grace, it is just who he is, and because it is who he is, he demonstrates grace in everything he does. Unfortunately, most of us are not always gracious, and it is certainly not who we are. Although we may be able to accept grace, extending it to others does not come as easily and may have to be both learned and practiced. How fortunate we are to be able to rely on God's grace as we struggle through until it becomes second nature!

When Grandma was 89 years old, she died in her bed in the nursing home where she had been living for about three months. When we were told it was most likely that she would pass away sometime before the next morning, my brother's wife, Mary, and I went that afternoon to say good-bye. When we arrived, Grandma was clearly slipping away, but she did rouse enough during our visit for us to be convinced that she heard and understood what we were saying. When it was time to go, I told her Grandma how much I loved her. Mary also told her that she loved her, but she added one short sentence, "Jesus loves you, too." Although her movements were quite limited, Grandma began thrashing about when she heard Mary's words. It took several minutes, but we were able to calm her, and when we left, she was resting peacefully.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard has often been interpreted to mean that even those who are converted late in life earn equal rewards along with those converted early. Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross confirms the interpretation that salvation is possible even at the last possible moment: "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise." I believe that I witnessed Grandma's last struggle before she gave up and claimed the gift of grace that she argued against for most of her life. My belief in the eleventh-hour conversion of my grandmother does not come from my hope that it is true, but rather from the Hope (a capital H for those who do not have the printed sermon) that is Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior.

It seems that everywhere we look, anger and violence are on the rise. Christian, do you hope that we will see peace someday, or do you believe that there **will** be peace on earth, and that it **will** begin with you? Do you believe that the impossible is possible because Jesus is our Hope? When worship is ended, will you begin your service by sharing God's grace with others? If you are able to answer "yes" to even one of these questions, say Amen.

