In Nomine Iesu

Septuagesima Sunday, 70 days before Easter, 2024
The unfairness of it all - Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.' And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own

things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

Grace be to you and **peace** from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Owner of the vineyard. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ,

It is unfair that some people work and pay taxes and others just receive benefits. It is unfair that professional athletes get millions just to play a game. It is unfair when we get a speeding ticket and the guy who just passed us minutes earlier going even faster didn't. It is unfair that parents do one thing for this child, more for that, and still more for the third. It is unfair that many children live in homes where they are regularly abused by their parents. It is unfair that some get cancer that is incurable and others the curable, and still others no cancer at all. Yes, we are all good at spotting unfairness in this world.

I

The human longing for fairness affects the church too. The Roman Catholic church insists that salvation is in part dependent on our good works. It condemns anyone who believes or teaches otherwise. Many who call themselves Protestant believe and teach likewise. Most people who do not even go to church are of the opinion that if there is a god and is a heaven, my good works, my efforts to do good, are what will get me there. It is all about fairness. In our heart we want everything to be fair.

Or think about politics. It is simply a long, extended argument about fairness.

So what is this longing for fairness all about? It is about you or me getting the good stuff we think we deserve, but not getting anything bad we really deserve. All the talk about fairness is a street leading to me with good things and away from me with bad things. The children of Israel followed Moses out of slavery in Egypt. But when things got a little tough in the wilderness, they complained how unfair it was that they were not living as they deserved to, living in the luxury they knew Egypt was able to provide. God had miraculously delivered them time and again, yet that was not quite enough. They gave little or no thought to what they owed to God. It was all about what God owed them. God was not being fair to them.

Jesus told the parable of the landowner and workers to teach us about the grace of God and warn us not to look for the rewards or compensation that we think we deserve. The parable is about the great treasures of forgiveness, life, and salvation God freely offers to all despite the fact that we have not earned them. In other words, the parable is not about the law. For the Law is all about earning something. The Law is all about fairness, justice, getting what we deserve. The parable is about the Gospel.

The first workers of the day worked the longest. But before they began they agreed to a specific amount of compensation. It seemed fair at the time, or else they would not have agreed to work the day for one denarius. So, they went out and put in the hours expected of them, and in the end got exactly what they agreed to, no more, no less. What made them complain at the end of the day?

They didn't look at what they had agreed to, they looked at what others got. Their complaints grew out of a sense of unfairness, of being cheated by the One giving them something good. To be sure, they would not have worked twelve hours for one denarius if they had known they could have gotten the same for working just one hour.

The other workers did not make such an agreement for a wage before they started working. Instead, the landowner had said to them, "whatever is right, I will give you." The workers simply relied on the landowner to keep his word, to give them what was right. And they received as much as the first ones.

This is not fair, is it? In fact, we can say without any fear of contradiction that the landowner was unfair. But the parable is not about salaries, and equal pay for equal work. It is not an example put forth to teach us about labor and management. The parable is about the kingdom of heaven. It is about how different Christ's kingdom of grace is from the world and its insistence on fairness in all things. It is about the gospel.

II

The kingdom of heaven, as we are often reminded, applies to us in two ways: Law and Gospel. That is to say, God speaks to us in two ways. In His law He speaks to us about fairness. If you do this, then you will be rewarded. If you do not, then you will have no reward. If you do this evil thing, then you will be punished; but if you refrain from doing evil, I will reward you. It is straightforward and fair. Everything balances out for everyone. It is in fact perfect fairness. Dear friends, it should scare us to death

that God will be fair to us, because God's fairness is truly perfect. It is not the street we would like to imagine, the one whose right lane delivers all good to us and whose left channels away all bad. God's Law is truly fair. It gives, yes. It takes away, indeed! But it does so based on what we truly deserve. The law is fair.

God's law is good and perfect. But we are not. Therein lies the problem. The good we so often do not do makes the law a problem, makes it the way of death instead of the way of life. The law demands that you have no other gods than the One who is God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It teaches us that when we fear or love or trust someone or something before Him, then that which we fear, love or trust more is in fact our god. When we begin to look at our problem in this way, God's way, we find that our lives are filled with many gods, many things that give pleasure, make us feel secure, give us power, let us impose our ideas of fairness on others, whether they like it or not. Whatever or whoever these things are, they are our gods.

Do you want God to be fair with you? Do you want Him to give you what you have earned with your thoughts, words, and deeds? Do you want Him to give you what you deserve for the way you've used all the gifts He gave to you? Do you want Him to reward you for all, and I mean all, you've done and not done toward your husband or wife? Do you want Him to treat you fairly for the way you've raised your children? Do you want Him to give you what you deserve for the way you've both honored and dishonored your father and mother? Do you want

Him to be as generous toward you as you have been toward your neighbors? What would it get you if God were to be fair with you? It would get you suffering for your sins right now, and then for eternity. **But it would be fair!**

But God is love. And love is not fair. Parents love their children even when deeply disappointed with them. The love with which we are to love others demands we be kind to them even when they don't deserve our kindness. That is real love.

God's love is just that. As such it is far above any love we can give. He loved us so much that He did not want us to die in our sins. So, He accomplished our salvation in a way completely unfair. He gave His best and dearest, His only-begotten Son. He didn't even bother to weigh all our sins to determine the precise amount needed to pay for them all. He just paid, and overpaid, paid so much that no amount of sin could ever come close to exhausting what He paid. The payment was the life and death, the shedding of the blood and the suffering of the torment of hell of His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. How unfair! How unfair it is that One should be stuck with the bill for all. **But that is what it means to be saved by grace.** Grace is unfair. Grace is love we do not in any way deserve. It is simply given. The is the gospel.

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Jesus teaches us that we should not be like those who complained at the unfairness of the landowner. Instead, we should rejoice at the unfairness of it all, at the grace of God, at love so deep as to be beyond understanding. **The**

only begotten Son of God has borne the heat and burden of the day for all of us. Such love allows us to come to God without fear, as children come to their own dear father, expecting only good. Such love allows us to rest in peace when we approach the last hours of our own life, for we know that by God's grace our sins will not be the weight that sinks us to hell. We have forgiveness for all of them, and will be carried to heaven. We are saved by grace alone. That is the great and wonderful unfairness of God's love for each of you in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God for His unfairness. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria