

September 24, 2017 – Bible Sunday  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Matthew 20:1-16

## Not Fair

Someone lives in a healthy way, cares for themselves and others, and gets cancer at age thirty. An honor student, who happens to have darker skin, gets tracked in the department store and avoided on the sidewalk. A woman with the same resume and work experience as a male counterpart makes less money. A man shows up for his job every day for forty years; the company declares bankruptcy, his pension disappears. People who've been working all day long in the hot sun get the same pay as someone who clocked in for the last cool hour. Life is not fair. This is life as we know it; this is life in today's gospel parable, a parable that wreaks havoc on the Protestant Work Ethic. That concept, coined by Max Weber and put forward as the force behind the economic development of North America and Northern Europe, proposes that hard work, personal industry, long hours will be rewarded. Not in today's parable.

Last week I suggested that when we encounter parables in Matthew we think of parabolas in mathematics. You remember parabolas, those great arcs that are graphed onto x y axes. Like paraboles, parabolas have recognizable plot points, but they also curve away in infinite ways. Parables say mind-bending things, positive and negative, like parabolas, my image for last week's sermon. Well, after church an interested listener suggested to me another connection between parables and parabolas. The listener did this by asking me if I knew how they light the Olympic torch. "Uh, no." With excited and technical detail the listener explained to me that they light the Olympic torch by using a parabolic mirror—a curving, concave, brilliantly reflective surface. When the sun's rays hit that surface, a parabolic mirror, the angles of curvature cause all the rays to be reflected and focused into a single point, which ignites in flame on top of the torch. So also, parables told by Jesus the Son (of God), concentrate energy, focusing it into a single point, which ignites, ablaze with meaning.

It's a catchy analogy. It takes something I suggested and runs with it—which is just what a preacher hopes a sermon will do: be heard, be internalized, be re-expressed. It's a catchy idea, but then we get today's parable, which seems to have this focus, this blazing point: that life is not fair, that you can just forget about equal pay for equal work. That burns. Why are so many unfairly compensated? Why do some work hard and are no better off? Why do ones who arrive early have to wait for their paycheck, and watch while others get a bonus? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Anyone who has witnessed or experienced life's unfairness cannot help but ask the question: Why? Why is life unfair? And by extension, God? If he's God, if that's who the landowner is, if that is what this parable is saying. Why do bad things happen to good people? It is a question that we cannot help but ask.

But the good people of the parable, the people who got hired first, they actually ask that question's mirror opposite. After seeing the latecomers get paid, the firstcomers ask the landowner this: "Why do good things happen to bad people? Why do those latecomers receive your largesse? Why are you making them look like our equals? Why do they benefit, when we are better?"

Better than whom? Better than people who, after a long day of rejection, will be able to eat dinner? The late hires weren't late because they just decided to sleep in. The late hires explain to the landowner, when he asks them why they are not working, the late hires explain simply, sadly, "No one hired us." They wanted to work—but no one wanted them. They were

not selected, not chosen. They waited, the whole long day, as the clock slowly ticked, waited with the thought that despite the abundance around them, once again, poverty would win the day. What are we to say and do about that? Blame those who suffer? Grumble against the landowner?

Here's what the landowner does: listens, patiently points out to the grumblers that he has honored his word, that those who came first received all he promised, though they are grumbling still calls them "Friend," reminding them of relationship. This is what he chooses to call us, not servant, but "Friend," as it says in another gospel. In these and other ways the landowner reflects divine qualities. There's also the crop mentioned: grapes, vineyards being an important Biblical image for and with God, who knows a thing or two about wine, and loves to share it. Another connection, having planted the land, now there needs to be people to tend it, which also sounds Biblical—sounds like the beginning of Genesis. From the first, in the Bible, in the parable, the landowner says he will pay whatever is right, and then hour after hour he keeps seeking those who have been overlooked, are unwanted, the last and the least. There is a place for them in the vineyard, too. The landowner is firm about this, but he listens, when some complain about it. And then he asks a question of his own. It is a question that sears into one's soul, "Are you envious, because I am generous?"

The parable does not explain why bad things happen in life, any more than it purports to be an employee handbook or corporate code of conduct. It is a story—a story with workers and wages, but that's not the point, that's not the focus. The focus is the landowner, who is not fair, who is more than fair, who is generous, who is gracious, who is gracious even to late comers—which we all are. We have all been late: late in time, late to love, late to see others as God sees them, late to see ourselves as much in need. We are latest of all when we think we are better than others. Still, God extends grace to us, as God extends it to all.

There is some irony that a push to labor long and hard and so be rewarded is referred to as the Protestant Work Ethic. The first Protestants, the reformers, would protest that that is was not the point of Reformation, it's actually the very opposite. We are not saved by works. The reformers said this over and again, wrote about it, preached about it, sang about it. There are any number of hymns about it, songs ancient and modern. We're singing all kinds of these songs every Sunday this fall. The one after the sermon has a particularly appropriate title, "For By Grace You Have Been Saved."

I want to end this sermon, though, by mentioning another song title that gets at this, too—but in a different way, a parabolic way. This song is not by Martin Luther. It's a song performed by Jimmy Buffet. I have to credit a colleague for pointing this out, but I really should have thought of it, because of my days working as a waitress at a place called "Margaritas on the Lake," at which Jimmy Buffet songs played on an endless loop. As does much of Buffet's oeuvre, the song I'm about to name calls to mind tikki torches. When you hear the title, think of them as torches lit by the Son, think of parabolic torches, think of today's parable, think of workers who came at all different times and all have reason to celebrate. The title of this song? "It's Five O'Clock Somewhere."

Pour a glass. Raise a cup. Raise a cup of wine. Raise a chalice, with its reflective, parabolic curve. This one's for everyone, and it's on the house. It is five o'clock, here.