

Sermon – Matthew 20:1-16

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Grace Lutheran Church

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“The View from the Back of the Line”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Our children are going to be exceptional adults. This is obviously true, and for a great many reasons. They're intelligent and musical and witty and cute. After all, our children are Grace Lutheran children, and Grace Lutheran is a lot like Lake Wobegon, where all of the children are above average. But there's another reason that they'll make such good adults: they have a finely tuned sense of fairness. Heaven help you if the pieces of a cake aren't cut in equal measure, or if not every child gets something from the store. Cries of “that's not fair” will fill the house. Of course, our children aren't unique in this regard. Hopefully, it means that they'll grow up to treat others equitably, but it will also help them become good at what most adults are interested in – making sure we get our fair share, what's coming to us, what we deserve.

2. You may have noticed today in the parable, however, that Jesus isn't interested in fairness in the same way that we are. It's the story of a landowner in need of workers, so he wakes up early, huffs it over to the temp agency, and hires workers for a twelve-hour shift at, say, ten bucks an hour. But there's more work to do and it needs to be done, so out he goes again at nine, at noon, at three, promising to pay each group what is right. Finally, he finds the last idlers left on the lot. They may not be up to the same level as the go-getters he found at 6:00 a.m., but the harvest needs to come in and he needs the help. Desperate times and all that. An hour later, in his joy at getting all the grapes off the vines, the landowner decides to have a little fun.

He tells the manager to call in the five o'clock crew first and to give them the full daily wage of \$120 as if they'd put in a twelve-hour workday. You can imagine the buzz spreading through the other workers: This guy's not paying \$120 a day, he's paying \$120 an hour! But such, alas, is not the case. They all get pay envelopes with 6 crisp twenties in them; no one, in other words, gets less than they were promised, but some get more, even much more, than they deserve. True to form, the daylong workers are incensed, but to no avail.

"Listen pal," the landowner says. "Don't I get to do what I want with what is mine?" I don't know about you, but I tend to identify with the grumblers here. I mean, they're right. It's not fair, not one bit. The landowner didn't lie to them, but that doesn't make it fair. Either the work is worth ten bucks an hour or its not. *And apparently it's not.* Apparently the work is worth whatever the landowner chooses to pay, and he seems decidedly disinterested in being fair. He's more than happy to give of what is his – fairly to those who worked all day and unfairly but generously to those who weren't hired until the end. And this, Jesus says, is what the Kingdom of heaven is like; this is what God is like, and God's not fair!

3. There's no avoiding the fact that this way of God being God is offensive to us. It sure didn't make Jonah happy! I mean, you can just show up at the end, pick a few grapes, and get exactly – EXACTLY – what those of us who have been busting our tails all day get? Well, then, why work at all? Why show up early? Why not loaf about and sneak in at the end? But those questions miss the point of the paycheck, the promise that God extends to any and all who show up at all, even if God has to drag us here. God delights in giving what God has to give – grace, mercy, peace; forgiveness, eternal life, love. And these are, quite simply, not things that can be fractioned. You can't have one-twelfth of peace, one-third of eternal life, one-half of love. You can't divide grace. So, rather than withhold it, God simply extends its – freely, generously, ridiculously. And if you have received these gifts in full, isn't it enough of a joy to have received? Can't we stop worrying about who showed up after us, or

with the wrong credentials, or with the wrong background, and just be thankful that, first of all, we have been given in Christ all that God has to give and, second, that it's good news that the guest list to the divine celebration keeps growing? Who cares if they don't deserve it? Neither do you! And neither do I! God, thank God, refuses to give us what we deserve. God delights in being generous, in giving us grace and mercy through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

4. God, Jesus shows us, is simply generous. God cares deeply about us, but not because of our net worth or our abilities or our work ethic. God just loves us and, loving us, gives us everything God has to give. Even the Son, Jesus Christ. As those who have been so graciously and generously invited into the Kingdom, we are also invited into a new way of living in which the way God has dealt with us shapes and molds the way we now deal with one another as people who are abundantly generous. In the television show *Louie*, there's a wonderful episode where the daughter asks her dad for a treat, only to be told that her sister got the last one. "That's not fair," she cries out over and again. After becoming exasperated in trying to tell her that the world's not fair, Louie finally gets down on his knees and looks his daughter in the eyes, saying, "The only time you look in your neighbor's bowl is to make sure they have enough. You don't look in your neighbor's bowl to make sure you have as much as them." As God's children, we have bowls, lives, filled to overflowing with the gifts of God that cannot be diminished – with the never-ending gifts of love and life, and time, talent, and treasure, too. All these are more than enough to give in this world to those in need as we become signs of God's generous, abundant Kingdom of grace.
5. So. Enough with fairness. Who cares? Enough with getting what we deserve? So what, and at any rate, be careful what you ask for. You have been given all that God has to give. Not a fraction of it, a pro-rated share, what you were owed. No, you were given ALL OF IT. So in worldly things, who cares if the

guy down the street has a little bit more than you? Even more, who cares if God is letting just anyone into the Kingdom – the achievers and the ne'er-do-wells, the highly qualified and the uneducated, the whole and the broken, and all the lazy, lost, least and last people of this world? Rejoice! It's the only thing left to do. And if you've been in on it for a while, it becomes nothing but joy to be no longer the first but now the last in the Kingdom of God. Which is really, I think, just Jesus' way of saying that once you get it, once it sinks in that it's not about you and what you have done but what Christ has done for you, that we become so giddy with grace that we can't wait to hold open the doors of the Kingdom for others and let 'em walk in first. The preacher Patrick J. Wilson puts it well: "The back of the line offers perspective . . . We see other people more clearly than we see ourselves. Thus when we see God's goodness to others – to people we love, to friends, to colleagues, but most especially to those people we do not think deserve such generosity – then we can see the goodness of God for the wondrous miracle that it is." So, my friends, in God's calculus, the orderly ways of this world mean not a thing when it comes to the celebration that begins when the workday ends. We are all beloved of God, named and claimed in Christ, and we are all going to the same place – into the divine heart of God's love. So enough with fairness, and on with the party, the divine feast at which every one is welcome, no matter how or when they show up. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.