

***Late to Work – Matthew 20:1-16***

**Rev. Matt Nieman**

**September 24, 2023**

Doesn't this story just raise your anxiety a bit?

The workers who showed up and only worked for an hour got paid the same as the ones who worked a full day. Ugh. Not fair.

It seems like most of the disputes or disagreements we have in the world are over the concept of fairness.

The United Auto Workers are on strike right now demanding better pay and benefits because they've seen auto companies' profits skyrocket in the last several years and management salaries go up accordingly. They're striking because they ultimately don't think they're getting a fair slice of the financial pie.

Our southern border continues to see an overflow of migrants making their way into the U.S. And once they're here, they're getting shipped in some cases to cities and other communities across the country at taxpayers' expense, putting considerable stress on local governments and disrupting neighborhoods. It's not fair, they say, that their towns should shoulder the burden of a broken immigration system. All the while, border towns and states would say it's not fair that *they* should have to shoulder the burden either.

Employees often say that the greatest cause of their unhappiness at work is due to perceived unfairness when it comes to promotions and other accolades their co-workers receive instead of themselves.

The Supreme Court this year struck down affirmative action in college admissions, saying it's unfair to base admissions largely on race. Proponents of affirmative action have long said it was the only solution to fighting long-standing discrimination in college admissions—fundamental unfairness.

It's not fair that the tenor who can hardly read music and always shows up for rehearsal late gets to sing the solos over the guy who's always early and is a whiz at reading music. Even though the first guy may just be a better singer, it still seems unfair.

Same is true for the hardworking, but less talented football player, volleyball player, runner, or tennis player. Talent seems to trump hard work. Not fair.

Speaking of unfairness, an old priest died and arrived at the Gates of Heaven. Next to him was a young Uber driver who died seconds before from his reckless driving.

The priest was called first, and St. Peter said, "For your life long-career working for the church, we will give you a small studio where you can stay for the rest of eternity."

Then St. Peter turned to the Uber driver, and said, "For your 2 years as an Uber driver, we will give you a giant mansion by the lake, and a Ferrari in a heated garage."

The priest thought it was strange and unfair, and protested, "Why does the Uber driver deserve so much more than me, when I have devoted my whole life to the church and God?"

St. Peter explained, "You see - during your sermons, half of the audience was sleeping, and the other half was just looking at their phones; but when the Uber driver was driving, everyone was praying!"

Not fair, but...

This parable that Jesus tells today, illustrating how despite great unfairness a person in authority can do whatever he or she wants, should not be seen as the justification to every modern-day unfairness. If anything, it's an acknowledgement that unfairness—as harsh as it might be—is part of and has been part of humanity's existence since the beginning.

And as is usually the case, the point Jesus was trying to make has more to do with who God is than who we are or should be.

And the point Jesus seems interested in making here is that God can choose to do whatever God pleases.

God is God, and God operates in a realm completely different than we do.

Maybe you've wondered what the purpose is in worshiping God. Sometimes we make worship out to be the vehicle for pleasing God with

our glory and praise. It's as if God gets lonely for attention or that God is so narcissistic that God needs to be lavished with praise.

Well, not really. God is certainly worthy of being worshipped. It does please God. But God doesn't need it. Instead, worship is more so for us. After all, we're going to worship somebody or something anyway—the people or stuff in our lives clamor for our attention. So, instead of worshipping someone or something, we turn our attention to worshipping God. And in doing so, we're more grounded and centered on the one who is really worthy of our worship.

Jesus' statement about the landowner reminds us that, just like the one handing out the wages, God can choose to do whatever with whatever belongs to him.

And because God is therefore the one who acts unilaterally, God tends to act in ways that show amazing and unconditional love. The hired hands who only worked a few hours or even one hour were paid the same amount as those who worked a whole day. It was unfair, but it was reflective of how gracious the landowner was and how God is.

When we talk about God's amazing grace, we can't really comprehend how amazing and lavish it is. Jesus went to the cross in an act that's really incomprehensible—all because of a love so deep we can only imagine it.

If that love is truly, then, beyond our comprehension, couldn't it also be that God's grace is extended far beyond what we think is reasonable or fair?

Only God knows what God will do; but it's reasonable to contemplate that, if Jesus went to the cross, he didn't just go there for some, including the devout—those who have been following him from the beginning. What about:

- The guy who comes to believe in Jesus only in the waning hours of his life – a deathbed confession?
- The serial killer who is sentenced to life in prison or the death penalty and shows no remorse for what he did?
- The dictators who rule their lands with iron fists and orchestrate the killings of anybody who raises their voices in opposition?

- The non-Christians who practice a faith that doesn't acknowledge Jesus as savior?
- The atheists who scoff at the idea of any God who rules the universe?
- And for that matter, what about us seemingly loyal and sacrificial disciples who aim to follow but always seem to mess up along the way?

In that case, we're all like those who showed up for work late and got paid for a full day. We don't deserve it, but if God's grace is so amazing (like the famous hymn says), who's to say anybody is left out?

Paul Tillich, one of the foremost Reformed theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, says this about grace:

*"It happens, or it does not happen. And certainly it does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. **It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.** Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: *'You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything, do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!'* If that happens to us, we experience grace."*

Those late-comers to work were shown grace. The last became first. Nowhere in our human ability to comprehend does that make any sense.

Jesus taught through this story, though, and really throughout the Gospels, that God tends in this direction—showing love and mercy when it's so undeserved. And we all fall into that category.

We all are recipients of an incredible and amazing grace.