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St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“Fairness in Perspective”

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

God isn't fair, but He's God and so He doesn't have to be. Be grateful for what He has given you. . . . That rather unsatisfying statement is what many believe to be the “moral” of the parable that we heard in the Holy Gospel this evening, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. So no wonder so many Christians have agita! Even though we swallow it, that that must be what this parable means, it just doesn't sit right with us! . . . So, I'm a Christian all my life, right, and this person over here converts on his death bed, and we both go to Heaven, and I'm supposed to be happy about that! I try to do what I should, and go to church every week, and read my Bible, and this person over here goes to church only on Christmas and Easter, and has dust an inch thick on his Bible, yet I'm struggling in this life and he has it easy, but I'm not supposed to grumble. (Agita!) And so we have a whole bunch of Christians today who don't really like the system, and still think its unfair, but at least are happy that they're getting paid at all, that they're going to Heaven. No wonder so many of us have “spiritual indigestion!” . . . Well, let's take a little closer look at this parable, and see what we're really being taught here. Perhaps there's a little more to it than meets the eye!

“The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. . . . And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too . . . Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them . . . 'You go into the vineyard too.'”

(1.) And so first: think about the fact that the owner of the vineyard went out *five times* during the day to hire workers. We're not told that he had to do that. There's no sense of urgency in his words, as if time was quickly running out to get his harvest in. It's told almost matter-of-factly, as if this owner goes out and acts as a generous old man who wants to hire and help those who have no work. How else to explain especially those he hired at the eleventh hour? In the one hour that they worked, did they really make that much of a difference in the harvest? Or did the owner hire them simply out of the goodness and generosity of his heart? To help them, to give to them. And to give to them not only the gift

of wages, but *the gift of work*.

You see, in our world today, we don't consider work as a gift, as a good thing. We do it because we have to, but we'd rather not. If you want to put it this way, you could say that work is a "necessary evil." . . . But that's not how God looks at it. When God created the world, He put Adam in the Garden of Eden why? To work. To work in the Garden. To take care of it in partnership with His Heavenly Father. And as with all things that God created, work too was good. It was only after the fall into sin that work is described as toil. But as Christians, born again in Holy Baptism, how should we consider work? As a "necessary evil?" Or is our work, our vocations in life, rather gifts from God? And so, by demanding "wages" from God, by expecting that He give to us and those around us in proportion to what we deserve, are we really turning this gift of God into a burden?

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went."

(2.) Now second, think about this: isn't it odd that only the first group of workers negotiated with the owner on their wages. To the next group (and then supposedly the next three also), the owner simply tells them that he will give them "***whatever is right.***" And this, apparently, is enough for them, as they go into the vineyard. . . . But not the first group. And so you have to wonder, who's idea was this negotiation? Perhaps it was the laborers, who thought they were only being prudent by establishing up front what they would receive for their work. But maybe all they did was actually limit the owner's ability to be generous with them! . . . And notice too that they were the only group that grumbled! Those hired at the third, sixth, and ninth hours arguably, by these standards, also had a right to consider their pay unfair! But we are not told of their grumbling. Only the group who thought they knew best. Only the group who wanted their pay spelled out at the beginning before they did anything. Only the workers in that group were apparently dissatisfied that they received only what they asked for!

So how do we deal with God? Is it not often in the same way as this first group? Isn't this why we think we should be given more? Think back to the Garden of Eden again. When Adam and Eve listened to Satan and became dissatisfied with what they had received, what happened? . . . Why do we grumble against God? Why do we sometimes grumble, and other times not grumble? Are we negotiating with God, and trying to hold Him to some standard of what we think is right and wrong, but in so doing limiting His ability to be generous with us? Do we think we deserve something if we keep the commandments – even if we could keep them perfectly? We read in Luke chapter 17, "***So you also, when you***

have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" And yet have you received from God even though you haven't even met that standard?

It is interesting how the actual Greek of the New Testament phrases the discontent of the first workers. In the translation that was read today, we heard that the owner said, ***"Do you begrudge my generosity?"*** And that's the right idea, but the original Greek is much more colorful and direct, saying: ***"Is your eye evil because I am good?"*** They were giving him the "evil eye!" They were green with envy! They projected evil onto the owner's good actions. . . . And isn't this what we do when we accuse God of giving generously to those who obviously don't deserve it, but "gypping" us? What do we *deserve* anyway?

"Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go.'"

(3.) And thirdly, consider that after accusing and confronting the owner, these grumbling, first workers are told, ***"Take what belongs to you and go."*** Usually I think that is understood as meaning that these workers are to take the pay that has been given to them and go home. But again, I wonder if there's not more to it than that? For consider what we heard of their negotiation at the beginning – the owner agreed to pay them ***"a denarius a day."*** Not, ***"a denarius for the day,"*** but ***"a denarius a day."*** Could this mean a denarius for each day they worked? Did the owner intend to hire them for a longer period of time? If so, their grumbling cost them any future in the owner's vineyard, for he tells them not just to be content with what they have received, but to ***"take their belongings and go."*** They got the pink slip, and will be back in the marketplace tomorrow, looking for another job, and perhaps will not receive even what they did for this day's work. And perhaps only then will they realize that the owner was not under any obligation to them. He freely hired them, and he freely agreed to their wage demands. And when they called into question this freedom of his, they found out that he was also free to let them go.

Now all of that gives us a little different perspective on this parable, doesn't it? One that doesn't give us "spiritual indigestion," but helps us to understand that the grace and goodness and generosity of God is something that perhaps we underestimate, or at least do not think of as much as we should. Yes, God isn't fair! If He was, He would take away from us the gifts from Him that we abuse, that we take for granted, that we even grumble against as if they were not quite what we were expecting, not good enough for us. If He was fair, He would give us what our sins deserve, and instead of disciplining us in love, would punish us and demand restitution from us. If He was fair, He wouldn't have sent His Son to

die for us. . . . Yes, God isn't fair, and thanks be to God that He's not!

You see, when we begin to think in terms of *deserving*, and we *obligate* God on our own terms, we turn His grace and Gospel into Law. We turn everything on its head. And so do we think we deserve special merit for coming to church every week? Then we do not see God's presence with us and worship as a gift from Him. Do we look expect certain blessings in return for our reading and study of God's Word, or our effort to keep His Word? Then we do not see God's voice to us as a gift from Him. Do we look at our lives with dissatisfaction, wondering why we weren't given more or better? Then we do not see our lives and work as gifts from Him. Do we look at the suffering and hardships in our lives as something to be avoided at all costs, or even as punishment from God? Then we do not see that even these things are gifts from God for our good. . . . And you can see the pattern here. For nothing that we have is ours, except our sin. And we deserve nothing from God except condemnation for that. But what have you received from God? Has He really been holding back from you, or being unfair to you? No! In reality it's just the opposite. We have received much more than we deserve, and we continue to receive much more everyday of our lives. We are the ones who are last, that God in Christ has graciously made first.

And no one knew this more than St. Paul. Few, if any, were as undeserving of God's goodness as He was. Few, if any, suffered more than He did. And so in all of his writings, Paul reflects this understanding of God's undeserved graciousness and goodness, that would take a man like him, who arguably was last in every respect in God's kingdom, and make him first. And Paul knew why he was first – because the Son of God, who was first, became last for him. The Son of God became the worst sinner, the most unholy, the most cursed, and in those ways, the very last of the last, and hung on the tree of the cross in the shame that came with that. . . . But Paul knew, and we know, that it was for us. So that we would receive not what we deserve, but exactly what we don't in any way deserve – forgiveness for our sin, life for our death, blessings instead of curse, sonship instead of expulsion.

And in that understanding, in that faith, when we hear Paul's letters, as we did again in the Epistle, he is always joyful, always hopeful, always confident. Whether he is suffering, or being rejected, or in prison, or whatever! He speaks *interchangeably* of life and death, of suffering and comfort, of work or rest. Because he knows that everything – even down to each breath – is a gift from God. And when even each breath you take is a gift from God, then how much more the life of eternity that we will live in Christ, in His kingdom which never ends!

And so dear brothers and sisters in Christ, rejoice in the multitude of gifts that your God and Saviour have given to you. All the blessings of this life and earth, but chiefly and especially the gift of faith that He has given you. That you, like Paul, know Him as your Father, your Saviour and brother, your Comforter. That you know of His love and goodness and

forgiveness. And rejoice in that as you remember the gift of your Baptism, and as you kneel at this altar, receiving the gift of the body and blood of Christ Himself. For He has not told you to ***“Take what belongs to you”*** – your sin – ***“and go!”*** But He has graciously taken what belongs to you, and given you instead the wages of His work, which is eternal life. And in so doing has graciously and generously and freely made you who are last the very first in His kingdom! . . . God isn't fair. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.