

Title: It's not Fair!

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, your love is more than we can understand; remind us that your ways are not our ways and that your forgiveness is to be shared generously, we pray through the one who died for our sins, Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Many people are familiar with the story of Jonah and the whale, except there was no whale. A whale is not mentioned in the book of Jonah. In fact, nowhere in the Bible is there a whale. Jonah was swallowed by a fish. I know ancient people were much smaller than we are, but it still had to be a very big fish.

Of course, to be swallowed by a fish, Jonah must have found himself in water and for a big fish, it had to be a sea. You see, God called Jonah to implore the people of Nineveh to repent and turn to God, or else. Jonah refused. Jonah knew that they would repent and God would forgive them and Jonah wanted no part of that. So, he ran.

He didn't actually run. He took a ship to get as far away from Nineveh as he could. But the voyage didn't go well. Believing God was causing a potential shipwreck, Jonah told the crew that God was punishing him and that they should throw Jonah overboard. The crew obliged.

God saved Jonah from drowning by having a fish swallow Jonah. I'm not sure how Jonah was able to breath, but that was not part of the story. Jonah is in the fish, undigested, for three days. During those three days, Jonah gives thanks to God and recommits himself to God.

God orders the fish to spit Jonah out. Jonah makes his way to Nineveh, which was in what is now northern Iraq. It was where Mosul is today. Jonah is successful and the king and people of Nineveh repent and God forgives them.

This makes Jonah angry. Jonah knew God would forgive them and Jonah believes that they were too evil to be forgiven. God's love and grace was extended to the gentile enemies of the Israelites. Jonah knew God was

gracious, but wanted the people of Nineveh punished, not forgiven. In essence, Jonah tells God, “I told you so!”

God’s grace appears in various and sometimes unexpected times in the Bible. It’s unexpected, because it appears when our sense of justice is upended.

Chapter twenty of Matthew begins with the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. The context of Jesus telling this parable comes after an anonymous person comes up to Jesus and asks what he must do to have eternal life. (Matthew 19:16-30) Jesus responds that he must keep the commandments. So he asks, “Which ones?” Well, there are 613 of them. The man assumes that neither he nor Jesus believe that all of them are necessary for eternal life. Seemingly, some must be optional. Jesus responds by listing some of the Ten Commandments and adds another law about loving our neighbor. You’d think that would be satisfactory, but no.

This young man seems to be a pain in the tuckus, because he is not satisfied with any of Jesus’ answers. He responds, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” I was getting the impression that he was looking for way out of getting eternal life as he adds more conditions upon himself. Jesus’ next response indicates that this man was looking for a way to be perfect and to be acknowledged as a perfect human being. Jesus told him that to be perfect, he is to sell everything he has, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus. He went away grieving because he had many possessions.

Peter was upset with this exchange and pointed out to Jesus that they gave up everything to follow Jesus. Peter is told that the twelve will judge the twelve tribes of Israel. He also said that anyone who gives up what they have will inherit a hundredfold and will have eternal life. Then Jesus says, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” (Matthew 19:30) Jesus illustrates that statement with the Laborers in the Vineyard.

Like many of the parables in Matthew, Jesus begins with, “the kingdom of heaven is like” whatever the story is about. This time it is a landowner who needs laborers for his vineyard.

We are familiar with grape growing in the Sierra foothills as we cannot drive very far without encountering a vineyard. When we drive through El Dorado

County, we will often note, “Oh look. There is a new winery.” When the crush happens, like it is now at this time of year, the vineyard owners must find people to go out and pick the grapes. In our country and in our time, it is usually migrant workers who do this work. It is *really* seasonal.

It was also seasonal in Jesus’ time. There was no such thing as migrant workers in Jesus’ time. There were more than enough poor people everywhere who needed work. More than 90% of the population in the Roman Empire were poor.

Not unlike poor laborers today who hang out in certain places hoping someone will stop by and hire them for the day or maybe a week, poor people in Jesus’ day would hang out in a town’s marketplace hoping for work. The sun was barely up when the owner found laborers in the marketplace and hired all of them. They agreed to the usual daily wage of one denarius, or about \$3.62.

The workers were too few and the vineyard was too large. The grapes won’t wait. The owner returned to the marketplace at nine o’clock and hired more workers. Maybe they slept in that day. They agreed to be paid whatever was right.

Not enough grapes were being harvested. The owner returned to the marketplace at three o’clock. The owner hired more laborers. Maybe they had a long, rough night, the night before. By three, they must be sober. The owner still needed more workers. The owner returns to the market place at five o’clock and lo and behold there are still more laborers. Maybe they were so late because they didn’t want to work, but didn’t want to go home and confess that they didn’t try to get work. “I was at the marketplace all day and no one would hire me!” They were hired also.

As the sun was setting, it was time to pay the laborers. The manager was told to pay the last hired first. The first hired were being set up. All of them received the usual daily wage. Those who were hired after dawn were expecting a bonus for all the extra work they did. They were sorely disappointed. And they complained to the owner. They were envious of the later hires. It wasn’t fair that they worked all day in the heat while the last hired only worked an hour.

The owner offered a defense that the earliest laborers were paid the amount that they agreed to. Every laborer was paid enough for their families to eat one more day. The owner told them, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” Why should they complain because the owner is so generous? Then Jesus concludes the parable with the same statement he made before the parable, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

When Jimmy Carter was president, he chose to communicate with the American people using the format of a fireside chat. Carter revived FDR’s tradition. I remember one, just one of those fireside chats. It was in maybe 1977. Jimmy Carter said, “Well, as you know, there are many things in life that are not fair . . . .”

Was it fair that some people in the Houston area had their homes flooded and others didn’t? Was it fair that a family in a Mexican church, celebrating an infant’s baptism, all died when the recent earthquake collapsed the church? Life is not fair.

When we were young, we expected life to be fair and we protested when we were slighted, “That’s not fair!” Part of growing up was a realization that life is not fair.

It was that kind of protest that Jesus provoked in his parable. The kingdom of heaven is also not fair, because it is a kingdom of grace. Grace is freely given regardless of how much we think we have earned it. It is not fair that the lazy ones, I am projecting here, got paid the same as the industrious ones in the vineyard. The lazy ones were no less deserving of grace. For the rich young man, it is not fair that having the most toys does not get you a win.

Jesus’ disciples were called first, but that doesn’t make them any more special than any other follower. Margaret Shuster said, “The more we insist on our tit-for-tat way of thinking, the more baffled and angry we will be at God’s whole way of dealing with us.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shuster, M. (2001). [Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A](#). In R. E. Van Harn (Ed.), *The lectionary commentary: theological exegesis for Sunday’s texts, volume three* (p. 114). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

I believe that God's love and grace are boundless. Someone who grows up in the church and is reasonably faithful all her or his life is just as deserving of God's grace as is one who converts on a deathbed. Likewise, because God never gives up on us, I believe that God will welcome dead atheists into heaven, if they choose to go. I think freewill continues in the afterlife. God's beckoning love continues there as well.

God is a lousy accountant. God is a lousy economist. Jesus challenges our pride and envy. Jesus challenges our holding on to grudges. Just as God loves us and forgives us, we are to love and forgive others.

Text: **Matthew 20:1–16** (NRSV)

**20** “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage,<sup>a</sup> he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup> and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup> When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup> And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup> They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup> When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ <sup>9</sup> When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.<sup>b</sup> <sup>10</sup> Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.<sup>c</sup> <sup>11</sup> And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> 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.’ <sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’<sup>d</sup> <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’<sup>e</sup> <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”<sup>f2</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Gk *a denarius*#

<sup>b</sup> Gk *a denarius*

<sup>c</sup> Gk *a denarius*

<sup>d</sup> Gk *a denarius*

<sup>e</sup> Gk *is your eye evil because I am good?*

<sup>f</sup> Other ancient authorities add *for many are called but few are chosen*

<sup>2</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version\*](#). (1989). (Mt 20:1–16). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.