

"What's the Deal?"

Matthew 20:1-16

Pentecost 16

September 24, 2017

"These last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have born the burden of the [whole] day." Matthew 20:12

Come on, that doesn't seem right. So, what's the deal? The laborers who worked almost no time at all get paid the same as those who worked a 12 hour day! That's not fair! What's the deal? *What's the deal with a God who doesn't care...what's fair?* The world is such an unfair place already and God, so it seems, just makes matters worse by rewarding those who don't deserve it, who haven't earned it! It's just not right! What's the deal?

The story of the Laborers in the Vineyard is told by Jesus in response to an urgent question from Peter in the previous chapter, *"You know we've given up everything for you. What, Peter asks, " are we going to get out of it?" "What's the deal?"* Peter wants to know. *"Will we be fairly rewarded for our sacrifice?"*¹ Peter's assumption was that he and the other disciples deserved to get something back for the commitment they had made, for their "full day's labor" so to speak. They had "earned" a reward.

In response to Peter's question, Jesus tells them this story of the Laborers in the Vineyard. But, apparently, they didn't get the point because just a few verses later two of his disciples *get their mother* to try to talk Jesus into giving them the top jobs when he takes over...just to *be sure* they are taken care of, just to *be sure* they get what they deserve.² Or, maybe that was just their mother's idea; who knows. In any case, she, or they, or the lot of them didn't understand the story. It just didn't suit their sense of what was fair and just. *They just didn't get it!* Do you? Do you get it? Do you understand the God who just doesn't care...about what we think is fair, who seems to ignore all the rules of fair play? What's the deal?

¹ Matthew 19:27

² Matthew 20:20f

The deal is this: "*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,*' says the Lord"³ in Isaiah.

Jesus is teaching his disciples, and perhaps teaching us as well. "*Let's understand one thing: you and God don't think alike.*" A human notion of fairness, ("justice"-we like to call it) and God's notion of justice are not the same. We calculate justice, so that everyone gets *exactly* what he *deserves*, right down to the last penny. You don't work an eight-hour day, you shouldn't get paid for an eight-hour day. We understand "*you reap what you sow*" and "*an eye for an eye;*" but we don't understand "*I choose to give to the last as I give to you; the last shall be first...*" Because that's not fair, not just. It unsettles us, messes up the system! We would rather just be settled right now about what is fair and who gets what. That way, we can know what to expect.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "People wish to be settled; but, only as far as they are unsettled, is there any hope for them."⁴ This parable of the workers tells us that God doesn't care if we get unsettled, and that being unsettled now and then might just be good for us, and that God will do exactly what *he wants* to do and not what *we think he ought* to do even if that shakes us up a little. He is the God who doesn't care about what *we* think is just and fair.

And, you know, that is a good thing...*for us!* It is just a good thing for us that God *doesn't* always give everyone exactly what he or she deserves. What do *you* deserve? I can tell you right now I don't want what I deserve! When we see our reflection, mirrored in the Ten Commandments, we are always reminded that, as Jesus interpreted those commandments, we have repeatedly broken *every one of them*. When we look honestly into our own hearts, we see what is there: our reticence to forgive, our unwillingness to share what we have, the enmity we harbor against the neighbor who has wronged us, the jealousy we feel toward those who have more, our desire for retribution; it's all there in each of us in one form or another, and we know that. So, is there even one among us here who would be so foolish as to stand before God's judgement on his or her own

³ Isaiah 55:8

⁴ Emerson, "Circles," in The Portable Emerson, p. 239.

personal merit alone? So foolish as to say: "Yes, God, give me exactly what I deserve."

The point of the parable is a very important one: God will be God. He throws out that fair and calculated justice which we humans seem to so cherish, **and practices instead a wild and irresponsible generosity**. This irrepressible generosity of God is called...*grace*; and it is the one and only thing on which you and I can hang any hope that we will *not* get what we deserve.

The point of the parable is *not* that there is *no justice* with God, but that it is a justice which we do not comprehend, which makes no sense to us, and which we are in no position to judge. Nor is the point of the parable that there is no judgment, no final reckoning or accounting of what we deserve; the scripture says quite plainly we will be called to account for every word.⁵ But for those who cling to the one hope for grace we have, in the person and promise of Jesus Christ, we are *assured* that God has traded a human notion of justice for a shocking and undeserved generosity, as over against getting what we deserve; for incalculable grace, as over against calculated justice; for compassion, as over against condemnation; for life as over against the death that our sinfulness fully deserves.

This is grace, mysterious, inexplicable, and overwhelming. It is worth devoting the whole of our lives to responding to this grace.

No, God's peculiar notion of justice doesn't make any sense, the cross doesn't make any sense, not to us. But, it apparently makes sense to God and that, in the end, is what matters. We should, every moment of our lives, give thanks to the God who doesn't care...about what we think is fair; but who does care so deeply, so passionately, so graciously for us, that his own Son's life was not too great a price to pay; who cares so deeply for us that there is nothing we can do to make him stop caring; who cares so deeply for us that it is divine grace we may count upon.

And our thanksgiving to God for his grace can only take the shape of that same grace we have been given; so that we, too, are gracious to one another, generous to a

⁵ Matthew 12:36

fault, not judging and condemning as we are wont to do, but loving with no expectation of return, caring when caring is not reciprocated, forgiving one another even as God has forgiven us, even if it makes no sense, even if it seems unfair, inequitable, an affront to our human notion of justice because the God who has forgiven us, the God who really doesn't care...about what we think is fair, has loved us and has given his only Son to die for us.

That is the deal!

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