

Fairness!
Matthew 20:1-16

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

These texts always remind me of the days I was part of Local 27 at Store 158, as a pharmacy clerk in a large Grocery Store chain. The pharmacy clerks had the job of running one of the four cash registers in the pharmacy department, or the one in the tobacco/cosmetic aisle. We also stocked everything that was not grocery food items, that means cooking pots, utensils, shampoos, school supplies, bird seed, charcoal, diapers, aspirins, make-up, gum and tic tacs, charcoal, magazines, cards, and books and much more. Several times a week trucks would roll in didn't matter if it was 10 degrees or 110 degrees in the truck we had to get that order out. Then we have to straighten and clean the aisles. While at the same time being neat, cool, and clean to help at the pharmacy counter when they got backed up, which happened a lot. Now for a High school and college student who worked five years in this part time job making almost 8 dollars an hour with full benefits was really good back in the eighties when minimum wage was still \$3.36 an hour. But the problem was the grocery clerks, which included the front end cashiers who got paid \$14.00 an hour after five years. Almost double what I was making and their entire job was to stand still and slide stock over a scanner all day. They didn't even have to bag or run price checks, they had parcel pick up clerks for that. That just didn't seem fair. We worked harder, did more things in the store, unloaded, ran registers, stocked shelves, cleaned aisle, wrote orders, and put up with the coughing, sneezing, wheezing lives of sick and ill people, but we made less than a person that stood still making the same hand motions all day long. It just never seemed to be fair, but there was more of them every time we voted on a new contract. It wasn't fair but that's what happened.

The same idea works into Grace. We talk about it a lot here at church in sermons and Bible study, but when it really comes down to it do we think it is fair? You here are the church goers, you are here worshipping, and praying and hearing the bible scripture. You are the ones who have come to baptism, been confirmed and received communion at the Lord's table. You give of your time and your financial support to expand the ministry of the church to care for those in need, to spread the word and build up fellowship in our community. What if you got to heaven and found out that God had let that angry, vengeful, none churched, person from down the street into heaven with you. What if you got to heaven and you find out that God has invited in people of all denominations, all backgrounds, from all nations and sexes and races, even Republicans and Democrats and independents, How would you feel about that? What if God lets in doctors and lawyers, politicians and car salesmen, lay-abouts and merchants, or even criminals that have done such nasty evil things that they were killed for their crimes, and yet they are in heaven? How

would you feel? What about the really awful people, mass murders, dictators, and torturers, what if they were invited to come to heaven also. What if I got to heaven and found out that God had decided to let EVERYBODY come in if they wanted to? What do you think about that?

This was Jonah's problem, of course. Most folks know some of that delightful Old Testament story. They know about Jonah running from God and the eventual three days in the belly of a big fish. Where Jonah is spewed up on the beach of the great city Nineveh and God says "Now are you ready to do what I want?" Jonah grudgingly agrees to go and preach to Nineveh.

But there is more to it. God had sent Jonah to Nineveh to preach; simply, "40 days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown" That's it - short sermon! There is no invitation to repentance, just this word of judgment. And the result is the most incredible response imaginable - everyone repents, from the highest to the lowest, from the richest to the poorest, they go out on the streets wearing sack clothe and covering themselves in ashes, begging God in prayer for forgiveness. From all walks of life, tens of thousands, over a hundred and twenty thousand city residents repent. So, as the scripture has it, "When God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them and he did not do it."

Jonah's reacts to this wonderful grace with a hissy-fit. "God! I KNEW this was gonna happen! I KNEW you were gracious and merciful, and I KNEW you would let 'em off. I told you that you were going to do this. Why did you make me come all this way to do this upsurd thing. Go ahead, God, just kill me right now? If I get back to Israel and word gets out that you spared Nineveh because they repented after MY PREACHING, I am dead meat anyway. This sin city doesn't DESERVE to be saved!" Then the prophet storms out of the city, plops himself down on a hill to the east, builds a little lean-to to shade himself from the hot desert sun, and sulks...hoping against hope that God will see how important this is to him and will go ahead and blow Nineveh away.

God tries to calm Jonah down. God gently asks him, "Is it right for you to be angry?" As a bit of a peace offering, God allows a fast-growing plant to spring up for a bit more shade. But Jonah still is upset and misses the GRACE of the plant. So, the next day God allows the plant to get eaten by a worm and when the sun beat down on him in his anger, God tries to show him his point, You are upset because of a plant that you didn't deserve is gone now. What if 120 thousand people perished should I not be upset.

And there the story of Jonah ends. We never learn whether Jonah gets his act together. But we do learn that God's grace extends farther than we would ever imagine and sometimes farther than what we would even desire.

Now just a few centuries later the scene changes. Move it to a dusty Palestinian roadside. Jesus is talking with his friends. Not very long before, a wealthy young man had approached them asking what good thing should he do to possess eternal life. Jesus tells him to be obedient to the commandments he has always known and then to give away his considerable wealth to the poor and follow. And we know he doesn't go, he can't let go of his possessions. Peter follows up with a reasonable question: "Look, we HAVE left everything and followed you. What then will WE have?" Jesus responds in a strange statement - "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matt. 19:30) .

Then Jesus tells the story in our gospel text about something they would all understand. The grape harvest ripened toward the end of September, and then close on its heels the rains came. If the harvest was not gathered in before the rains broke, it was ruined; and so to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time. The landowner would come to the marketplace where day-laborers would gather before dawn. "I'll take you, you, you, and you," (as many as necessary), they would agree to work for what would amount to minimum wage - normally a denarius - not much, but enough to feed the family, and they would be off to the harvest. In this case, the owner of the vineyard found himself needing more and more workers to beat the rain, so three more times that day he hired more people - some at nine in the morning, some at noon, and even some at five in the afternoon, just an hour before quitting time. So far, so good.

Now the story turns strange. The pay checks come out, and you can tell they are not unionized. The folks who had only been at work for an hour were paid a denarius. Those who had been on the job since noon were paid a denarius. The ones who began at nine that morning were paid a denarius. Even those who had put in twelve long hours were paid that denarius. No surprise, they thought this was unfair, well everybody but the ones who only worked one hour, they start to sound like Jonah and they sulk and began to grumble against the landowner.

But he replied to am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

Then there is that line again: Jesus says, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." In other words, in God's Grace, things are not necessarily as you would expect. Jonah found that out. The disciples are told this same thing. And the key to it all is the first words of our text, Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like. Not the earth, not human worlds, or union rules, or man made wishes, but God's kingdom is like this, filled with Grace, where the last are first and the first are last. God the Lord of all, loves all and wants to offer the same grace to all people.

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Now ask that same question again: What if you got to heaven and found out that God had decided to invite EVERYBODY to come in? The message of the gospel is that is exactly what Jesus did. Even though we and Jonah might not like it, Christ died for all. All are welcome to receive that grace. Since we have received it and accepted it we live in it and by that blessing, seeking out those who still need to know of this grace.

That is the Gospel text, that is the Good News, that one man died for all people so that all people may receive that grace. Sadly, some will decide not to come in, but the gift is there and the decision is in their hands to receive God's grace. It will be theirs, not Jonah's, not mine, not yours, not even God's. The truth is that grace can never be deserved –God gives it freely to all. Thanks be to God that we have received that grace. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. AMEN.