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Sermon by Pastor Daniel Gensmer

It's not fair! (Matthew 20:1-16)

¹*“Indeed the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing to pay the workers a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³He also went out about the third hour and saw others standing unemployed in the marketplace. ⁴To these he said, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶When he went out about the eleventh hour, he found others standing unemployed. He said to them, ‘Why have you stood here all day unemployed?’*

⁷*“They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’*

“He told them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

⁸*When it was evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last group and ending with the first.’*

⁹*“When those who were hired around the eleventh hour came, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰When those who were hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But they each received a denarius too. ¹¹After they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner: ¹²‘Those who were last worked one hour, and you made them equal to us who have endured the burden of the day and the scorching heat!’*

¹³*“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not make an agreement with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what is yours and go. I want to give to the last one hired the same as I also gave to you.*

¹⁵*Can't I do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶In the same way, the last will be first, and the first, last.”*

Math is tough. Especially growing up I really detested math. I would grind through my workbook and read word problem after word problem with situations such as this man who had a cart full of watermelons.

Now you already have 7 watermelons, but this man gives you 12 more watermelons, and then you and your friends would eat two of the watermelons. How many watermelons do you have left? Sure, it's not like that sort of math was the hardest; I could figure it out on my own, but it was a real drag to take the time to do the math... ok I have 17 watermelons left... thanks, man with the watermelon cart.

But as much as I wasn't a fan of math, the moment it came to dividing up things fairly with my brothers, I suddenly became an expert. I remember growing up and when it came time to divvy up dessert, my parents would have a rule when it came to the last slice of cake: “one person gets to cut the last piece into two, and the other person gets to choose which half they want.” And boy oh boy, when that happened, I would whip out the ruler counting out each 1/16 inch of cake so that no matter which piece my brother chose I wouldn't get gypped, because if he got the bigger piece, it wouldn't be FAIR!

We love measuring out fairness. But when we take that ruler of fairness out and put it up to God, you might exclaim, “IT'S NOT FAIR!” But that's sort of the point: is God fair?

Well, right before the parable Jesus shares with us in our sermon text, Peter wanted to get to the bottom of that: Is God fair? He looked around at what he and the rest of the Disciples had done for God and his kingdom. He pulled out his ruler of fairness and asked Jesus, “Look, we have left everything and followed you! What then will we have?”

It's true the Disciples had laid it all out. They left their livelihoods, their comfortable way of living, all to follow Jesus, so Peter wanted to know: after all of this, what were they going to receive? Were all those sacrifices going to count for something? Because THAT would be FAIR.

And this parable right here is Jesus' response.

There are a couple of elements worth picking out here. We have a few different characters. We have the landowner, and since this parable is about the kingdom of heaven, this landowner represents God. We

have the workers this landowner hired at the beginning of the day. And we have the rest of the workers that were hired but didn't work the entire day.

Now what's interesting is the fact that right there at the beginning of this Parable, the landowner laid out the terms of their service. They work for the day, they get a denarius. That's fair! The Denarius was the standard payment a worker would receive for one full day of work at the time of Jesus.

But here's the twist: not only did the landowner hire the first workers he found at the beginning of the day, but he kept on going out and finding more and more people to come work in his field so that he could bring in the harvest, and each time he promised them, saying, "I will give you what is right."

And honestly, it would have been right and reasonable if the landowner paid these second-tier workers a little less than the first group; I mean, they didn't work the entire day, after all. That would be fair.

But as they gathered together at the end of this long, grueling day, the landowner lined up all the workers one by one to dole out their payment. And you can kind of picture those first workers waiting in anticipation as they see the landowner open up his bag of Denarii. He goes up to the workers who showed up about an hour ago, and they both get a Denarius. "Wow, we must have had a solid day of work if the boss is paying like this!" Then he goes to the workers who showed up around noon, and they get a Denarius too. "Ok, that's surprising." But then the Landowner goes up to the workers who were there almost the entire day, and they get a Denarius too. "Really? I kinda expected it to be a little more." But then the Landowner approaches those first workers. They have been there since the beginning. They worked hard, even when the sun was beating down on them around noon! And the landowner reaches into the bag to pull out **one single denarius**.

Just like everyone else.

You can almost hear those rulers of fairness coming back out. Sure, the landowner promised them a Denarius, but they look at the denarius in their hands,

and then to the denarius in the hands of the others and they exclaim, "IT'S NOT FAIR!"

Notice that those First Workers sort of have a point. They turn to the Landowner and complain, "**Those who were last worked one hour, and you made them equal to us who have endured the burden of the day and the scorching heat!**" I think we can hear through their frustrated voices and see the finger of blame pointing at the Landowner, "It's not fair!" I mean, they did labor longer; they suffered more. I am sure they were exhausted, sore, and frustrated because receiving this one single Denarius felt like a slap in the face, considering that all those other easygoing slackers never had to endure what they did. Sure, from the perspective of these First Workers, it looks like the Landowner is NOT FAIR! But that was far from the truth.

And since we know that Jesus is using this parable to tell us all about God and his kingdom, do we ever adopt the perspective of those first workers as we turn that finger of blame right back at God? Because undoubtedly we have all experienced "the Heat of the Day" at one point in our lives. And even as our faith clings desperately to God and his promises, life does not stop. At times it beats down on us like the blazing Phoenix sun in the middle of July. Because I think we have all had periods in our lives when it felt like the world came crashing down on us.

Work is slowly burning you out, but you still squeeze in time to show up on Sunday. You fight to make Jesus a priority in the lives of your children, but as hard as you try, it feels like an insurmountable challenge. As you sit in the pews, you might look calm and collected like the rest, but it's just a mask covering up the anxiety, grief, loneliness, exhaustion, and marital struggles no one else sees.

But everyone else around you seems to be doing *just fine*! They don't struggle as much as I do. They seem to have the perfect family. It doesn't look like they wrestle with their mental health the way I have my entire life. And we whip out that finger of blame and point it right at God because we've started keeping score, "Really God?! After all this!? After I have kept trusting you, after I have shown up for you day after day, this is

what you give me?! **IT'S NOT FAIR!!!**" Why do they get that family? Why does their life seem easier? Why did you give them what you didn't give me?

As I said, I think those First workers had a point. Like you, they had suffered the Heat of the Day. But they were wrong about what their suffering meant. They took what they had endured, and turned it into a debt God owed them.

And I don't think we want God to be fair. Because if God were fair, the Heat of the Day pales in comparison to the judgement we had coming. If God gave us what we had earned, we wouldn't be standing in his field – we'd be standing under his judgement. Because like those First Workers, we had a deal with God... "Be perfect, as the LORD is perfect." ... but we failed.

That's why we turn back to what the Landowner says in Jesus' parable as he exclaims, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not make an agreement with me for a denarius?" The Landowner gave those workers exactly what he promised. And that's exactly what God does for you. He doesn't give us what we earned. He gives us what he promised. And what God has promised you is totally unfair. It wasn't just a standard denarius; it was a Savior – a Savior who suffered far worse than the Heat of the Day for you.

He knew hunger. He knew exhaustion. He knew sadness. Jesus knew the struggle of dealing with family members who called him crazy for pursuing his mission in Mark 3. He knew what it felt like to be completely drained after pouring himself out in service to others.

And at the end of Jesus' ministry, what did Jesus receive as compensation? It wasn't one singular denarius. It was a betrayal. It was torture. It was a cross. It was the wrath of God. If anyone had the right to hold the ruler of fairness up to God and exclaim, "IT'S NOT FAIR!" Jesus did.

And don't misunderstand what happened at the cross. Jesus suffering was not fair. Jesus dying was not fair. God didn't sweep your sin under the rug. God is still just. God still delivered the judgment your sins deserved. **Just not to you. He gave it to Jesus.**

So now, instead of handing you the payment your sins earned, your Landowner places something entirely different into your hands. Forgiveness. A place in his Kingdom. Eternal life. Whether you have been working in the fields of God's kingdom your whole life or came stumbling in at the final hour, the gift is the same... because God doesn't give us what we earned. He gives you what he promised in Christ.

And that's why Jesus ties the bow onto this parable as he declares, "the last will be first, and the first, last", because in God's kingdom, there is no room for us to pull out those rulers of fairness to complain, "I deserve more!" Because God has already given you everything. He gave you his son. Jesus gives you his righteousness. And God has set aside a home for you in heaven.

So, let's pull that ruler of fairness real quick. Wow! God, IT'S NOT FAIR! You have given us so much more than we deserve. It's not fair. It's grace.