

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 17
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
It's not fair!

Indeed the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing to pay the workers a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ He also went out about the third hour and saw others standing unemployed in the marketplace. ⁴ To these he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶ When 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. ¹⁰ When those who were hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But they each received a denarius too. ¹¹ After 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?' ¹⁴ Take 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?' ¹⁶ In the same way, the last will be first, and the first, last."

—Matthew 20:1-16

Let's do a little exercise to promote peace and happiness in your family. After church today, go down to the grocery store and buy a big tub of ice cream. When you arrive home, set out enough bowls for all your children. Serve the oldest one first. Scoop a nice scoop of ice cream—make it generous—and give it to the oldest. Then scoop two scoops of ice cream and give that bowl to the second oldest. Then scoop three scoops of ice cream and give it to the next child. (I'm assuming you have multiple children to serve.) Keep going until you get to the youngest, and serve up a heaping pile of ice cream scoops to the littlest one. (Did I mention you need a *big* tub of ice cream?) Then sit back and watch and wait to see how long it will be before the oldest child says, "Wait, that's not fair! How come they get *two* scoops, and I only got one?" Then you can respond, "You're so right! How unfair!" and switch the dishes of ice cream around and give the single-scoop dish to the youngest and the fully-loaded dish to the oldest. That will solve the problem, right? No, now the whining will come from the other end, but there will still be complaining. "It's still not fair!" Remember, the purpose of this little exercise is to promote peace and happiness.

We have a very well-developed sense of fairness, don't we? That sense of fairness or justice shows itself even in our childhood. One kid—especially a smaller sibling—gets more ice cream? That's not fair! And indignation arises because it's *supposed* to be fair! Things *should* be fair, shouldn't they? The statue of justice on top of the courthouse is blindfolded because justice is supposed to be blind and indifferent to race, wealth, status. Anything else is unfair. We have umpires to call balls and strikes. We have referees to call fouls and false starts, so everyone plays according to the same rules. The United States Securities and Exchange Commission has stringent rules about trading based on inside information that might give certain people an unfair advantage over others in the market. It doesn't matter if you're rich or famous or even the President of the United States; nobody is above the law. No special privileges, no unfair treatment. Fair is fair!

Until it comes to God. Then we don't want fair. I mean, we really *don't* want fair! Hold that thought—we'll come back to it in a moment.

"I'm going to tell you a story," Jesus says. Our series of sermons that starts today takes us into some more of Jesus' parables. They're simple stories with powerful meanings for us to take to heart. Today Jesus tells us a story that turns "fair" on its head. It starts with an invitation. "Come and work in my vineyard," said the landowner to the laborers. He agreed to pay them a denarius. Since a denarius was a day's wage, a bargain was struck, and the landowner sent them into his vineyard to work. Everyone was happy with the arrangement. It was *fair*.

But Jesus' story continues. *About the third hour* [about 9:00 a.m. in our time] *he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.* Notice they didn't agree on a price. They wouldn't expect a full day's wage; they were starting late, after all. They just trusted that the landowner would compensate them *fairly*, and they went to work. The same thing happened throughout the day. Every three hours or so the landowner went out recruiting, all the way up until the

eleventh hour—5:00 p.m. in our time—and sent more workers out into the field. Each of them went, trusting they would be paid *fairly*.

So now 6:00 p.m. comes around, and it's quitting time. At the end of the day it's also time to be paid. The landowner instructs his foreman to start paying people in the reverse order they were hired. The 5:00 p.m. latecomers stepped up to be paid, and they each received—a denarius! Wow! A full day's wage for one hour of work! This was much more than they could have expected. They had to be happy! If, as we heard last week, a denarius equals about \$130 in today's money, then getting paid \$130 for an hour of work had to feel pretty good. But when it came time to pay those who were hired first, the mood turned sour. Those who had started at the beginning of the day were paid the denarius they were promised, but "*when they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'*" That's not *fair*! But wait a second . . . did the landowner cheat them? No, they had agreed to work for the amount of money, and their employer was not refusing to pay them what they agreed to. They weren't being cheated. The landowner was just being especially nice and extra generous to the others. "*He answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Tak your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'*"

Let's analyze Jesus' story. What lesson is he teaching us here? He starts out by saying "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." so we know there are spiritual parallels. In simple terms, the landowner represents God, the vineyard represents the church or being part of the church, and the workers are believers who are called by God into the vineyard. You and I listen to Jesus' story, and we nod and smile politely, and we say, "I get it." But in reality, we don't want to dig deeper and take to heart the hard lessons Jesus is teaching. Because finally this story is about *you* and me. It's about our overdeveloped sense of fairness. It's about an *underdeveloped* sense of who we really are by nature. And it's about the envy, bitterness and resentment that so easily well up in our hearts and spill over into our lives. How's your sense of justice? How angry do you get when you perceive something that's not right—especially when *you* feel you're getting the short end of the deal? How much of your sense of injustice is driven by envy? How much of that envy makes you become bitter and resentful toward others? Jesus has more to say to us in this story than we might think.

Let's start with fair. The landowner represents God, so let's start with this notion that we want God to be fair. We don't want God to be fair! We don't want God to try us on the scales of his perfect justice. If God were fair, you would be in hell. And so would I. God says, "Keep my commandments," and we have shattered them. God says, "Be holy, as I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), and we have fallen short of God's holiness. Jesus says, "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), and we have failed miserably to come close to our heavenly Father's perfection. Holy Scripture says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and that's a description of *me*. God details the punishment for idolatry and adultery and anger and greed and says, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 5:23), and each of us must look into that mirror of the law with shame and dread and confess, "That's me!" You don't want God to be fair. We don't want God to treat us *fairly* in retribution for our sins. No, let's celebrate the fact that God "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10). God's not *fair*! Praise the Lord! Thank you, Jesus! The way God treats us is not *fair*!

When we grasp this simple difference between what God owes us for our sins, versus what God *gives* us by his mercy, it strips away every sense of entitlement, every notion that God owes us the good life. Instead of whining and complaining about what we're not getting, we are overwhelmed with the awareness that everything we have is a gift. Undeserved! Unearned! A gift! And God is the giver. Instead of envy and bitterness and resentment about what other people have, we are driven to our knees in thankfulness for what we have. We're bowled over with gratitude for God's mercy, for every blessing that we enjoy that flows from his kindness.

Instead of giving us what our sins deserve, God has given us himself. God the eternally begotten Son took on human flesh. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son" (John 3:16). God owed us hell; he gave us Jesus instead. Jesus stepped into the breach and took upon himself the punishment of our sins and suffered the hell we have deserved. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 5:23). Justice was satisfied in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and we received mercy. The forgiveness of our sins! Immortality! Heaven! It's not *fair*. It's grace!

Stop and reflect on what that grace means for you. Pause and ponder on the grace you have received. Infinite mercy. Hope and peace and life forever. Stop and reflect on how *good* God has been to you. How much he has loved you, the depths to which he stooped to save you in his incomprehensible kindness to you, the infinite price he paid with the innocent blood of Jesus that was shed, the joy and comfort and blessings you enjoy in this short life this side of eternity, and the indescribable glory that you will enjoy with Jesus forever. No, it's not *fair*. It's grace!

In Jesus' story we can think of the vineyard as representing the church and the invitation to work as the call to discipleship, the call to be a Christian. The Christians who have been laboring all day long receive the same reward of

eternal life as the Christians who come to faith in the last hour of their life. The Old Testament Jews who have been faithful to the LORD God receive the same reward as the prostitute who repents or the Gentile dog. One Christian bears the cross of discipleship for Jesus his whole life, another Christian trusts Jesus on his deathbed, but when each falls asleep, they both go to heaven. Again, it doesn't seem fair; that's the attitude reflected in the comment of the first workers, "*You have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.*" But that's a wrong way to look at being a Christian. It's not a burden and a pain and a struggle and an annoyance to follow Jesus. It's the highest privilege and the greatest joy. Just knowing Jesus, to know his love and to have his forgiveness, to be with him, to trust him, and to follow him is the greatest prize of all. Knowing Jesus, holding Jesus, tasting Jesus, receiving Jesus—this is the ultimate grace. And the more we grasp this grace, the more we ourselves want to be gracious. Not *fair*, but generous and giving, even to the undeserving. Because then we get to be like Jesus. Then we get to reflect his grace.

God gives his love, his kindness, his Son, his forgiveness, his heaven to you and me. It's not fair! It's a lot better than fair. It's grace! Amen.