

PENTECOST 16

September 24, 2017 (Saint Peter)

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“I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous.”

Grace and peace be unto you from God our creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

My dad is great. He is a piece of work though. He is a person of faith and a wonderful churchman. He was a machinist and then a labor union organizer. One of his big beefs is the notion that sometimes it sounds like getting into heaven is too easy.....and he fears some underserving people might get in.

What is the kingdom of heaven like?

If you ask my father he would say, it is like the world the way it oughta be.....clear and fair. Everybody has a Boston accent so you can understand each other. The Good guys are in, The bad guys out, everybody gets what they deserve and you get in the old fashioned way.....you earn it. Oh, and Yankee fans and rap musicians and people who don't work for a living are in big, big trouble.

And today's parable really bothers my dad. Ask Jesus what the kingdom of heaven is like and he says it is like a landowner. A landowner who went out early in the morning and negotiated a deal with some laborers to work in his vineyard.....maybe like a landowner who made an agreement with some day-laborer grape pickers that he picked up at the corner. And then later he went back and got some more and then later back for some more and told them he would do right by them. And finally he went back at 5:00 for the last group who only worked an hour. If the truth be told, the last group was kind of a sad and limited lot.....which of course is why they got passed over the first four times. And when it came time to pay the laborers, he paid them all the same.....the ones who worked all day....the ones who worked a few hours.....the ones picked last who worked but one hour. When the first workers who had endured the hot sun all day long complained about how everyone could be paid the same, the landowner basically said, "What , I gave you what I told you I would. Do you have a problem with me being generous to others."

And that's what the kingdom of heaven is like. And my Dad hates this parable. But that's what it says so Have a great day. Really?

I can imagine at least three meetings taking place right away after this landowner's labor and wage decisions. The board of the vineyard corporation will call an emergency meeting to censure the CEO for ridiculous business practices. No company pays workers the same for a day's work and an hour's work and that is clearly no way to increase the profit line....Let's get this

under control and right quick. At the same time the Labor Union....local 144—the Galilee grape-pickers will call a meeting and vote for a picketing of the company. Unfair and inequitable pay grievances, preferential treatment, contract violations, and a general disregard for seniority and good work practices. This has to stop and right quick. And I imagine there is a meeting called with the laborers who were hired at 5:00 and paid for a whole day and the prodigal son who returned home from blowing all his inheritance to an embrace and a party, and the dishonest steward and Zachaeus and Mary Magdalene and the whole host of characters whose mouths are still hanging open from having experienced the wildly generous, totally unexpected, and completely amazing grace of God.....All the folks still laughing and shaking their heads at the best news they ever heard.

Of course, those meetings didn't take place and this parable is not a lick about how to run a business or proper labor practices. The parable is probably any number of things but one thing is for sure.....it is about the unimaginable generosity and grace of God. And it is about how difficult that is for most of us to accept.....ya know, it just isn't fair.

And if you were hoping I would understand just how unfair this all sounds.....well, I do understand. The prodigal's older brother who always did the right thing and the workers who labored all day and the Pharisees and all the rest of us have a point.....there is nothing particularly fair about grace.....nothing at all. It is, by definition,

underserved....unmerited.....unearned. It is.....at its core.....not fair—just wildly generous.

Let me be as simple as I can (and Lord knows I can be simple).....there are lots of fancy theological explanations for our human condition but at the heart of many of our difficulties with embracing the Gospel is that we really do believe in keeping score. In our heart of hearts we keep score with each other in as many ways as we can imagine.....what we have or don't have, what we drive, our bank account, our address, our gender, the shade of our skin, the place we are from.....our accent, our education, our job, our political views, our kids, our favorite team, how tall, how thin, how smart, how many awards.....if there is some way we can keep score and compare ourselves to one another we will do it. Day after day we think we can stand taller by knocking down someone else. Even when we confess that we are not perfect and have our shortcomings we make sure to add that we are not as bad as “him” or as unredeemable as “her”.

And in our heart of hearts we think God keeps score.....and for all this preacher's talk about grace we can't seem to shake off believing that God will love those who deserve it. The Kingdom of heaven is surely reserved for those who worship the right way or break the fewest commandments or hold the correct theological positions or eat the right foods, or follow the right moral guidelines or, at a minimum, are just more deserving.....better cut of people.

Frankly, the kind of people who when they hear this parable always think of themselves as the ones who worked all day. Am I envious of your generosity

Jesus.....you're darn right. The kind of people who worry about making it too easy to get into the kingdom of heaven and some unworthy folks might sneak in.

So maybe the glorious truth is that we are the 11th hour workers. The ones who haven't got a leg to stand on but the grace of God. And getting into the kingdom of heaven is easy.....as easy as nails through the hands of Son of God. It turns out that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less. And there is nothing we can do but sing and praise and give thanks for a God who saves all the grace....a full day's worth for the last hour workers on payday. Saves an eternal lifetime of grace for such as us.