

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 20:1-6

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“All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” This line from George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, published 75 years ago, still haunts us. As the pigs and their canine police slowly take more and more power, their maxim becomes strangely real: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” It’s an extraordinary twist of phrase, taking something we find comfort in and making it unsettling. But it’s all too real, too close to our actual experiences, too scary how quickly words can have their meanings shifted right before our eyes and how quickly what we think we know can be changed and turned upside down. Everywhere we look, we see these changes. Facebook friends, politicians, and authors work their magic with words everyday, and our language changes. We live with these changes, these shifts, going on around us all the time, sometimes for the good, sometimes not. We ought to be used to it by now, used to the constant cultural switcheroo, the unexpected twist, but somehow we’re still caught off guard as those changes come from unexpected places or at unexpected times.

Now, I have to admit, I kind of dig this parable. It’s such a good setup, so well-laid out. The workers arrive, ready for the usual daily wage for a usual day’s work, then another wave, and another, all expecting to be paid what’s right. But that deal is never made explicit; “what is right” isn’t clearly defined at the outset. We all know how it should go. We all know how it probably would go. So when the last workers to arrive get paid first and receive a full day’s wage, we know something’s up. Jesus doesn’t just tell parables to fill the time. The next wave steps up, and the next, and the next, and they all get paid the same. Imagine if you were one of those that had worked all day, sweating in the hot sun, sure you’ll never clean all that dirt from under your nails, never get all the splinters out from under your skin. You’ve heard that the last folks got a full day’s wage, and you trust the landowner to do what’s right. Maybe you even get excited enough that you stop picking at your fingertips for a second, hoping for that great windfall. But when they hand you the envelope with just a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work, what then? I wouldn’t settle for a shrugging “fair’s fair.” I’d be indignant. I’d want to know what happened to my money, comparing what I got to what they got. “What happened to my fair share? Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for equality, but shouldn’t my share be at least a little more equal?” And that’s the hook. Jesus has got us, and we’re stuck, identifying once again with the losing side of the parable, with our own sense of what’s fair, what’s equal, begrudging someone else their equality as if my experience of fairness is somehow lessened by yours.

But we should have seen this coming. We shouldn’t have been caught off guard, at least not by this landowner. This landowner goes out looking for workers and keeps bringing them in. This landowner is motivated by what’s right not what’s deserved. This landowner reaches out arms of welcome and offers purpose, at least for a day, at least for a few hours. And this same landowner pushes back: “are you envious because I’m generous?” You see, God’s Grace cannot be calculated, should never be expected, never presumed. ‘Cause God’s Grace is wily, unexpected, a shifting target. Just when we think we’ve got it, something as simple as “fairness” goes and changes on us. But I don’t think we should beat ourselves up over this. We’re human, and it’s so easy for us to become anxious over earthly things, far too easy to forget the reasons we do what we do. In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, there’s a great line. He says, “Live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.” He doesn’t say, “Live like Christ.” He says, “Live in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.” And thank God. We’re given permission not to be Jesus. We’re given permission to hang out in Jesus’ story, permission to be Nicodemus searching in the night, permission to be a confused disciple, permission maybe even to be a Pharisee clinging to comfortable ways while all the world changes around us. We’re given permission to be walk-on characters trying to figure out who this Jesus is. In other words, we’re given permission to be human, and that permission catches us up in parables and surprises us with grace. But we are not given permission to stagnate.

We can be all these things, and still turn to God, be all these things and still have room to change, to develop, to err, and to repair. We ought to feel the twinge when Jesus says, “Are you envious because I’m generous?” because we think we’re the ones doing it right. And just then we ought to feel the twinge again, ‘cause instead of living lives worthy of the Gospel, we try to force the Gospel to live in a way worthy of us. Shoot, that’s Jonah, pouting that the Ninevites got to feel God’s grace. It’s God’s grace that brings us together, not hoping for a happy ending on our terms. It’s a grace that pops up when we least expect it, that changes when we aren’t looking, changes us when we think we’re closest to grasping it. God’s generosity with that grace is unfailing. All of heaven rejoices when a sinner repents, a legion is driven out and an evangelist born, a woman sees Christ and upends her life to follow him, a thief confesses on a cross with his dying breath. And they all taste God’s Grace, taste at God’s invitation, on God’s terms. These are lives lived hard but never so hard that they’re out of God’s reach. Lives that don’t deserve forgiveness, didn’t earn grace but got it anyway.

But there’s that hook again. Because we don’t deserve it either, don’t deserve that grace and certainly don’t deserve our grace to be a little more graceful than theirs. ‘Cause just like everybody else, we fall in those same traps, get caught in those same hooks, living lives changed as thoroughly as language, lives surprised by grace, and in spite of ourselves, thanks be to God, lives still worthy of the Gospel.