

It's Not Fair
September 21, 2008 - Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
11:00 AM Service
Rev. John L. Thompson
Matthew 20:1-16

Fred Craddock, in his book, **Craddock Stories**, tells about being on a flight back when they still had smoking sections on airplanes. Craddock was seated in the no smoking section. He was seated on the aisle. Across from him sat a man who pulled a long black cigar out of his pocket and lit it up. Soon the area was filled with foul-smelling smoke. Craddock stopped the flight attendant, a very attractive young woman, and said, **"Am I in the wrong section? I asked for no smoking."** Realizing what he was saying, she said to the man with the big cigar, **"Uh, sir, this is no smoking."** He ignored her and kept puffing on his cigar. Craddock complained again. Again she reminded the man he was in the no smoking section. It did no good and Craddock was infuriated.

Later on during the flight, the flight attendant was coming down the aisle with a tray of drinks. She was right between Craddock and the man with the cigar when they hit an air pocket. The sudden turbulence caused her to dump the drinks right into the lap of the man with the big cigar. But that's not all. Seeking to correct her balance, this very attractive flight attendant fell backward . . . right into Fred Craddock's lap. And Craddock says with a sly grin, **"Now, don't tell me there's no God." (1)**

I wish life always turned out so neatly, but it doesn't. The guys in white hats do not always come out on top.

I remember in Atlanta, a lady hit and killed a cat in the parking lot of the store up in Lennox Square. It was during the Christmas season. She put the cat in a box that was beautifully decorated and placed it on top of her car. While she was putting her shopping bags inside her car, a couple of teen age boys came by and snatched the box that was on top of her car truck and ran away. Now I tell you, I would have given a week's pay to have seen their faces when they opened that box.

Sometimes things do sort of even out, but not always. When we work we earn wages which we deserve because we have given something of ourselves for them. But grace is unearned, underserved and freely given without any cost or effort on our part. Isaiah reminds us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways. **(Isaiah 55:8)**

To illustrate the truth of this doctrine Matthew offers the parable of the workers in the vineyard. This is the way the kingdom of heaven works: Jesus told a parable about a landowner who went into the market place early in the morning to hire laborers a common practice in rural communities in some places even today. Those he hired he agreed to pay the standard wage for a day's work. Three hours later he saw that he was going to need more laborers if the work was going to get done. He returned to the market place and hired some more. About noon he again found it necessary to hire more workers, then again at three o'clock, then again at five; just one hour before quitting time. It is worth mentioning that one crew had no knowledge of what the other crew had agreed to. At six o'clock he had his foreman line up the laborers to be paid. He began with those who had worked but an hour. He paid them for a full day.

Watching this were those who had worked since six in the morning. They rubbed their hands in delight. **"Wow,"** they thought to themselves, **"If he pays them a full day's wage for working just part of a day, think how much he will pay us!"** When their time came, however, they also received the standard

wage for one day's work. They were mad. They had worked all day and they were receiving the same amount as those who had worked just one hour. It wasn't fair. It wasn't just. But the landowner said, ***"Didn't I pay you what we had agreed on? If I want to be more generous with these others is it not my right? Is it not my money to do with as I please?"***

Now, that's a hard teaching. This parable is one of the most beautiful and disconcerting of all the parables because it most arrestingly proclaims the grace of God; a grace that gives according to our needs and not according to our desserts.

This parable represents a vigorous denial of a point of view Jesus found most prevalent among the religious people of his day: **"God helps those who help themselves"**. Some theologians use to call this **"bootstrap religion"**. It sounds good, but it's not doctrinally acceptable, nor is it representative of anything Jesus said, or did.

I believe this parable stands as a giant roadblock against anyone who dares to think they can earn enough of God's love to put God in their debt. According to Bonhoeffer, there is no such thing as **"cheap grace"**.

I realize this parable is offensive to anyone who wants to apply it to the rules of strict judgment or sound economics. We are blessed that God does not deal with us on the basis of strict justice and sound economics. The way this man has dealt with each of his laborers is a classic picture of God's grace; a divine grace that baffles all rational calculation. It's not an indiscriminate grace, nor does it speak against moral rectitude. But rather, God chooses to whom he will give his grace and requires them to live a life reflecting his love and mercy. Does not the bible teach us that ***"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked?"*** (Luke 12:48) ***"Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you."*** (Deuteronomy 16:17)

This is certainly what the employer did in this parable. Can you imagine his astonishing generosity, especially to the last crew that came on at 5 p.m. and how it affected that first crew? It was his generosity that provoked their indignant protest, not his unfairness, not his cruelty, not his ugliness, but his generosity. Their protest was a selfish concern for their own desserts. Even to undeserving sinners God grants a place in his kingdom.

The kingdom is not offered to those who build churches, burn mortgages or pay their apportionments, or elect bishops, but to those who are **"sinners"**. Jesus said in **Luke 5:32**, ***"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*** If God chooses to love an alcoholic, a prostitute, a rapist or a drug addict as much as he loves us, then, this is God's right! God is God!

Some year's ago an immigrant and his family were boarding a big ocean liner to come to America. He took a large sack of peanuts with him. And at meal times he and his family would sit down and eat peanuts. Of course, it wasn't long before they grew tired of such a meager diet. So one day the man asked one of the officers of the ship how much it would cost for him and his family to enjoy one of the meals they could smell cooking each day.

The officer smiled and told the gentleman, **"Sir, the price of the meals was included in the fare you paid when you got on board."**

Welcome aboard! You are a member of the family of God. The price has been paid by the blood of Christ. Come grow your spirit with us. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.