

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**“THE MATURE HEART”**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**  
**September 21, 2008**  
**8:45 A.M. SERVICE**

Many people assume there is a fundamental fairness in the world. *Does* everything happen for a reason? *Do* all of us get exactly what we deserve? If life were so simple, we would never have to worry about the poor and suffering. But Jesus said the sun rises on the evil and the good, and the rain falls on the just and the unjust.

Therefore, one biblical truth is crystal clear: God is both righteous and merciful. God holds us accountable for high standards of morality. But God is also willing to forgive our sins. God always gives us more blessings than we deserve.

The most popular and useful of all metaphors may well be the heart. May be this is because the heart is so versatile. According to Jesus the heart can be *“pure.”* (Mt 5:8) But Jeremiah insists *“the heart is deceitful above all things.”* (17:9) James writes of deceiving one’s own heart. (1:26) The psalmist praises the *“merry heart”* both for its medicinal and its cosmetic benefits. (15:13; 17:22) One novelist writes that the heart is *“a lonely hunter.”* (McCullers) One poet writes of *“the deserts of the heart.”* (Auden) Chesterton wrote of *“the blind side of the heart.”* Yeats wrote of *“the deep heart’s core.”* Some insist that a heart goes pit-a-pat. Some say a heart can ache. Others insist it can break! Everyone knows it can burn, with love or indigestion. Most outrageous of all, the physician tells us the heart is only a muscle!

The grinch who stole Christmas, we are told, suffered from smallness of heart. He had a heart two-and-a-half times too small. How can we measure the size of the heart? Perhaps there is a clue in today's parable from Jesus.

Jesus tells of a man who hired laborers for his vineyard. Early in the morning he went to the marketplace and found some men who agreed to work for a denarius a day. Several times during the day the owner returned to the marketplace and hired more workers. At the end of the day, he paid all the workers the same wage, one denarius. The ones who had worked all day complained that those who were hired at the end of the day received the same wage as they had. The owner said, ***"I am doing you no wrong, because you agreed with me for a denarius. Take what belongs to you and go. If I decide to be generous to these others, am I not allowed to do what I wish with my own money? Do you begrudge my generosity?"***

This is not a parable about workers' rights to equal pay for equal work. It is a parable about the generosity of God. On either side of this parable Jesus uses a proverb that was common at that time about the first being last and the last first. **(19:30; 20:16)** The proverb was used in Jesus' day to stress equality. In the Book of Fourth Ezra, judgment is likened to a ***"round dance,"*** a circle in which no one is first or last. **(5:42)** The vineyard owner was honest with everyone, paying what was agreed on, but he was exceptionally generous with some. The problem was with the workers who could not admire the generosity of the owner or rejoice in the good fortune of the other workers. What does their reaction say about the size of their hearts?

The owner asked, ***"Do you begrudge my generosity?"*** The Greek translation of "begrudge" render his question, ***"Is your eye evil?"*** ***"Evil eye"*** was a term for envy or stinginess. Consider the setting of this parable. Jesus has just encountered ***"the rich young ruler."*** When the man goes away, Jesus says to the disciples, ***"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."*** This statement astonishes the disciples. Then their real concern is revealed when Peter asks what their rewards will be, since they have left all and followed Jesus. Now Jesus is not dealing with the wealth of the ***"rich young ruler,"*** but with the profit motive of his own disciples! This is why Jesus told the parable.

One mistaken interpretation says the meaning of the parable is that all heavenly rewards will be the same. The clear point of the parable, however, relates to the attitudes and motives of the workers and to the generosity of the owner. Jesus called for followers who asked for no guaranteed wages or rewards, who were responding to the challenge of serving the kingdom of God. In the service of God the greater rewards are for those who seek no reward. Jesus' generosity is extravagant personally and spiritually. He offers himself to us and invites us to relate to him in trust and love. Bargaining, looking out for No. 1, hoping for material rewards is totally foreign to such a relationship.

If the disciples in their immature years gave evidence of small-heartedness, in their maturity they more than compensated. They lived, served God, and died with remarkable magnanimity of spirit. They put behind them all concerns for material security or comfort, and lived solely for Christ and for the world for which Christ died. Their lives demonstrate that the heart can grow.

This is what is said of Abraham Lincoln, **“Middle-aged and from his own point of view a failure, he was set upon making himself a bigger man.”** And what a giant he became! While we live in time there is always the possibility of enlarging our lives from within. The infantile self-centeredness that is appropriate for young children is often, only thinly disguised, carried over into adulthood. When this happens it is one of the greatest of tragedies. The small heart has little room for gratitude, what a tragedy! The small heart has little feeling for others, and can neither weep with those who weep nor rejoice with those who rejoice. The small heart, like the vineyard workers, cannot celebrate the generosity that benefits someone else.

It is extraordinary evidence of spiritual power that the heart can continue growing even when all our other faculties are declining. Benjamin Jowett, in a letter, wrote: **“Though I am growing old, I maintain that the best part is yet to come - - the time when one may see things more dispassionately and know oneself and others more truly, and perhaps be able to do more, and in religion rest centered in a very few simple truths. . . . There may be more peace within, more communion with God, more real light instead of distraction about many things, better relations with others, fewer mistakes.”** Thank God, the heart can grow!

The world of children can help us understand that complete equality is both impossible and a bad idea! Treating children exactly the same way is fair only if their needs are exactly the same. Fairness is a matter of rightness. We treat some fairly if we do right by them, whatever this may involve. Some require more attention, others less. Some require more help, others less. Each child should be known, loved, and nurtured as the unique child of God he or she is.

Inequality can be found everywhere. All human beings may have equal value to God, but in everything else inequality reigns. This, however, should never make us fatalistic about inequality. Wherever we find unfairness in people's lives, we should do what we can to redeem the situation. I would love to be your pastor, particularly if you are among those who suffer from unjust forms of inequality. I would love for this to be your church.

Reading II - Philippians 1:20c-24-27a

The things of this world would concern us less if we could see everything in the light of eternity. A noble life is far more important

than a comfortable life. Integrity matters far more than success.  
Productive toil is better than indolent leisure.

Reading III - Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus was not against such principles of fairness as equal pay for equal work, but he knew that a completely “fair” world would leave no room for generosity. Sometimes there should not be a one-to-one relation between work and reward.

#### GENERAL INTERCESSIONS

Inequality can be found everywhere. All human beings may have equal value to God, but in everything else inequality reigns. This, however, should never make us fatalistic about inequality. Wherever we find unfairness in people’s lives, we should do what we can to redeem the situation. Let us pray for those who suffer from unjust forms of inequality:

For victims of natural disasters whom governmental agencies refuse to help.

**We pray to the Lord.**

For children who are denied pre-school and medical care because of family poverty.

**We pray to the Lord.**

For the handicapped who are not allowed to do work they are capable of doing.

**We pray to the Lord.**

For the elderly whom physicians turn away because they only have Medicare.

**We pray to the Lord.**

For women who still receive less pay than men for comparable work.

**We pray to the Lord.**

For people of color who are still denied full access to their legal rights.

**We pray to the Lord.**

O God, we know that your ways often transcend our standards of justice and fairness. Grant us wisdom to see that we all live in a beautiful and grace-filled world. Show us the ways in which we can correct some of these injustices. Save us from measuring our life situations only in relation to those who seem to have perfect lives. Grant us all the gift of gratitude, for we receive more than we give, and more than we deserve. In the name of Christ the Lord. **Amen.**