



Sunday September 24, 2023  
Matthew 20:1-16 (Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Tony Acompanado

A few years ago, there was a pair of zoologists who decided to study the evolution of fairness. They wanted to explore where our dislike for unfairness comes from and find out if it's something we learn from culture, or if it's hardwired within us? So, they designed an experiment using capuchin monkeys. And they placed pairs of these monkeys into side-by-side cages where they could see each other and trained them to take turns giving small rocks to their human handler. Each time a monkey surrendered a rock, she would receive a piece of cucumber as a reward.

Capuchins love cucumbers, so the monkeys found this to be a good arrangement and enthusiastically handed over their rocks. But then, the handler changed things up. After a few fair and even exchanges, the handler rewarded the first monkey with a chunk of cucumber as usual but gave the second monkey a grape – which would be like the equivalent of a fine delicacy in the monkey world.

Seeing that the game had changed for the better, the first monkey got excited, and eagerly handed over another rock, expecting, of course, to receive a grape, too. But no – the handler gave her another piece of cucumber. And to make things worse, the handler then gave the second monkey another grape for free!

The first monkey just about lost her mind. Not only did she refuse to eat the cucumber; but she threw it at the handler. And then proceeded to bang against the cage, throw her remaining rocks, and make angry gestures at her grape-eating companion. Scientists have also studied the development of fairness in human babies and found that infants as young as nine months old will react quite strongly and negatively to perceived unfairness. Clearly, as the researchers concluded after their experiment, fairness is a concept that is deeply rooted in our human nature.

Which brings us to this week's gospel that presents a story about fairness that might very well lead us to behave like that first monkey in the experiment and throw a few cucumbers at God. *Why?* Because this story turns our hardwired assumptions on their heads, and it challenges us to consider tough questions about fairness, justice, and equality that we'd rather ignore. And so we're left to wrestle with the scandalous goodness of God, a goodness that calls us to become instruments of grace – even to those who offend us most deeply. A goodness that asks why we so often prefer justification to rehabilitation – prison cells and death sentences to hospitality and compassion. A goodness that exposes our smallness and stinginess, and our reluctance to embrace the radical and universal connection God calls us to embrace. A goodness that reminds us how often we grab at the second chances God gives us, even as we deny those second chances to others. A goodness that dares us to do the braver and riskier thing – to hold out for the hearts of those who belong to God, whether we like them or not.

After all, we know what fairness is, and we know how it's *supposed* to play out. Equal pay for equal work is fair. Equal pay for unequal work is NOT fair. Having our sincere efforts



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noticed and praised is fair. Having them ignored is NOT fair. Rewarding hard work and determination is fair. Excusing laziness and disorganization is NOT fair.

We live in a culture that teaches and rewards that the only place worth standing is at the front of whatever line we happen to be in. Academic, musical, athletic, professional. Why be second when you can be first? Why be mediocre when genius is what pays? Why bother with your neighbor's needs when resources are scarce? Work hard. Work harder. Work even harder still.

Happiness comes to those who struggle the longest to achieve the highest success. Because that's how the world works. That's how fairness works. *Right!?*

But God – *if we believe that the landowner in Jesus's parable represents God* – God is not fair. At least, not according to our traditional beliefs about fairness. God, it turns out, doesn't believe that the best place to be is at the front of the line. God isn't interested, as *we* so often are, in showing favor to the best, the biggest, and the brightest – the workers with the most elite educations, the most amazing professional achievements, or the fanciest clothes.

In fact, the landowner in Jesus's story doesn't judge his workers by their hours. He doesn't obsess over why some workers are able to start at dawn and others are not. Perhaps the late starters aren't as literate, educated, or skilled as their competitors. Perhaps they have learning challenges, or a tough home life, or children to care for at home. Perhaps they're refugees, or don't own cars, or don't speak the language. Perhaps they struggle with chronic depression or anxiety. Perhaps they've hit a glass ceiling after years of effort, and they're stuck.

Whatever the case may be, the landowner doesn't ask them to explain or defend themselves. All he cares about is that every last person finds a spot in his vineyard – the early bird and the latecomer, the able-bodied and the sick, the young and the old, the popular and the forgotten. When the workday is over, what concerns the landowner is not *who deserves what*. All he cares about is that every worker ends the day with the dignity and security of a living wage. The capacity to go home and feed a family. Sufficient security and peace of mind to sleep well. A solid grasp on hope. And a sense of accomplishment, belonging, and dignity.

And I also don't think it's a coincidence that the landowner insists on paying his workers in reverse order. I think he intentionally makes sure the first workers see what the last receive. He wants them to experience what radical generosity looks like. He wants them to abandon their anger and join the party. He wants them to use their abundance to build longer tables, not higher walls.

I think the problem that we have with this whole thing is partly related to our culture of individuality. We're much less focused on the good of the whole and more concerned with the gratification of self. We've been taught through countless consumer messages that we need to look out for our own self-interests first. Before we can give to others, we must be responsible



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for our own well-being; there has to be enough for us first before we can even think about turning our attention outward.

When I hear the words of Jesus in today's parable, I'm reminded of the problem we have with generosity. We want to control it, manage it, and conform it to *our* vision of what and who is worthy of it. But God's generosity doesn't work that way at all. God's generosity is unrestrained. Even the last and the least are worthy of God's love and saving grace.

And this is the God we discover in Jesus. The God who looks at us in love and overlooks all those places we fall short and chooses to shower us with undeserved grace, generosity, and love. So be reckless with your abundance and limited with your needs and wants. Think less and do more. Stop comparing yourself and your life to others. Refuse to compete in such a way that someone must lose for you to win. Trust that in God's world there is enough for everyone. Let go of expectations based on what you think you or others deserve. And as the parable tells us, if we do that, then the world would look a lot like the kingdom of heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen!