

“The unfairness of grace”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Today, we are going to talk about the F-word. I know you never expected to hear the F-word from the pulpit. It’s not an easy thing to hear. But we’ve got to talk about it. Calm yourselves; I’m just going to say it: fair. What did you think I was going to say? This is church!

Fair. It’s a word that’s best accompanied with a long, drawn-out whine, as in “It’s not fair!” Thus has spoken every child everywhere.

Thankfully, if you happen to hear a child speak these three deadly words, you have a wide array of responses to choose from. Maybe you’re an optimist, and you think to yourself, “I bet I can reason my way out of this!” So you try to explain logically why the situation is *in fact* fair. I like to refer to this as the Titanic maneuver. It starts out hopeful, but never ends well. Or perhaps you’ll go with the scorched-earth option, saying, with a weird satisfaction, “Life’s not fair! Get over it!” Somehow this doesn’t seem to make the child feel better. Or maybe you’ll try to be witty by playing on the double meaning of the word, saying, “Of course not! The fair is in Syracuse! Get it? The state fair?” Again, somehow, this doesn’t usually play well with the 6-year-old crowd. Or perhaps you’ll just give in, resigning yourself to a fate of complete dominance by your child. I mean it was going to happen eventually anyway, right?

Or, you could take the approach of Jenna’s mom. This is what I like to call the preemptive strike, or the nuclear option. Jenna’s mom banned the word *fair* before Jenna could even speak the word. Jenna’s mom taught her that *fair* was a curse word. It was not to be uttered in her presence.

Jenna never knew what would happen if she were to say the word *fair*, but she knew it would be terrible and devastating. So when she heard another second-grader in Girl Scouts shout, “It’s not fair!”, in front of her mom, Jenna clasped her hand over mouth and said, “Ohhhh... She said the F-word!” Jenna then looked at this girl as if she would never see this child alive again. It was the proudest moment in my mother-in-law’s life.

Of course, it’s not just children who want life to be fair. All of us want there to be some kind of justice and order to the universe. We want to believe that good will be rewarded and evil punished.

The disciples following Jesus wanted the same thing. Before Jesus tells this parable of the laborers, Peter demands that Jesus reassure them. He says, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” In nearly the same breath, the mother of James and John asks that Jesus ensure that her sons have a special place of privilege in his kingdom. The disciples are like the workers who arrived early in the morning and labored all day long under the hot sun. They understandably feel that they deserve more than the workers who show up at the last hour.

Any other leader would have offered them comfort. But not Jesus. Nope. He tells a story that likely frustrated them—and us—even more. It's not a fair story. The landowner pays the same wage to those who labored all day long as he does to those who worked only for an hour. What's worse, he pays the late-comers first! The ones who have been there all day have to wait at the back of the line and receive their wages last.

It's no wonder that they protest!

It's not fair that those who genuinely try to live good and faithful lives receive the same grace as those who show up at the last hour, asking for God after leading selfish lives. It's not fair, as it is written elsewhere in Matthew, that God "makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good" alike.

Why do we show up at church, or volunteer long hours, or pray every day, or give away our money and possessions, or embrace and love difficult people, if in the end we are made equal to those who don't do those things?

Yet, this is how grace works. Anyone who shows up receives it.

But Jesus wants his disciples to understand more than that. He wants them to see that the kingdom of heaven is both just and gracious. It is just to those who labor long. They receive exactly what was promised them. They are not cheated. In turn, it is gracious to those who do not deserve full pay but receive it anyway.

Such grace seems unfair, because we see life as a competition. We believe our value is relative. We think we can only matter if someone matters less. This is what most upsets the early laborers in Jesus' story. They say, "You have made them equal to us." They believe that fairness should make them superior.

But that is not the fairness offered by God. What's fair is that everyone gets an invitation to the vineyard. Everyone gets a chance to receive their daily bread.

The invitation was a gift for the early laborers. And it was a gift for the late-comers. A gift that the late-comers apparently hadn't yet heard about. When the landowner asks them why they've been standing idle all day, they answer, "Because no one has hired us." They didn't know that someone wanted them.

Every worker in that vineyard, whether early or late, started in the same place—standing on a lonely corner, unsure whether they'd survive the day, unsure whether they'd have enough money to eat and feed their family, unsure whether anyone cared.

We who have labored long for righteousness forget that we were once no different from those who arrive late—or from those who still stand on corners, waiting. We too were once idle, and could easily be again, with no knowledge of the vineyard capable of saving our lives. And then we were called. We were valued. We were given work.

All day long the early laborers got to be in the presence of someone who desired them. They got to do meaningful, life-giving, proud work. They got to grow good things. They got to be in the company of their fellow laborers. They got to know that their work would feed and nourish others. They got the peace of knowing they'd eat that night.

In thinking that discipleship was a race to see who sacrificed the most and was thus rewarded the most, they failed to see that discipleship was the reward, one worth sharing.

We who try to worship, make the world a better place, and live faithful lives (imperfectly, we might add) get the reward of experiencing the presence of God here in this vineyard. It can be hard work. It can involve sacrifice. Jesus never hides this fact. Nor does Jesus ask us to forgo rest. But if we think of it only as a burden to be rewarded later, better than all those other slackers, we miss out on the gift that's right before us.

I myself was faced with this choice last Monday, as I began to prepare this sermon. It was a long day in a series of long days. I worked without break for more than 14 hours; worked over lunch and dinner. I did things I didn't want to do. I answered emails, cleaned my office, and dealt with the thrilling topic of church parking. I felt like an early laborer, self-righteous and superior.

But then I thought about all the gifts I had received that day. I got to visit Auburn's permaculture park and hear the dreams of young leaders in our community. I got to help plan a support group for people with aging parents. I got to sit with Jane Lumb and talk for more than two hours, swapping stories and planning a service to celebrate her life and the resurrection. I was fed dinner by the Worship Committee. I got to sit in the chapel and pray for many of you. I got to talk, as I do every day, with my boys Ezra and Leo and tell them how much their daddy misses them. I got to go for an early-morning walk with my wife. I got to work with passionate, giving people. I got to see the peace and grace of God in a smiling 90-year-old woman who is dying.

I got to be in the vineyard.

Knowing that didn't make me superior. It made me want to see others join me. It made me realize that grace is not cheapened by inclusion. It is expanded. Because the more laborers in the vineyard, early or late, the better the vineyard becomes—for us all. It's better than fair. It's heaven.

Amen.