

Matthew 20: 1-16

### **I Didn't Deserve That!**

Here is Jesus, telling a story about the Kingdom of God. He did that quite often, you know, telling stories to open up the unimaginable and drawing word pictures so that we could see the invisible. And as usual, his stories about the Kingdom are not exactly what we would expect the Kingdom to be like. His stories about the Kingdom always seem to upset the apple cart, and this one is no exception. In fact, this story has proven down through history to be the most upsetting story of all. Let 's review this story that Jesus told about the Kingdom of God. "The Kingdom of God" he said, "is like a landowner" who went out about six o'clock one morning to find some people to work in the vineyards. When he found some men standing around looking for work he bargained with them for thirty dollars a day, in modern money, They went out to work in the fields. But the landowner needed more workers. About nine o'clock he found some more and sent them out into the fields without a contract. All they had was the promise of fair payment. Again at noon and three o'clock he found more workers and sent them into the field. When there was about an hour left in the workday, he saw some men just standing around on the street corners with nothing to do. "Why are you standing around with nothing to do?," he asked. "No one has hired us," they said. "You too go out into the fields." They went with no promise of payment at all. When the end of the day came, the landowner said to the foreman, "Pay the workers. Pay the ones who worked only one hour first, and the ones who worked twelve hours last." When the money was handed out, the ones who had only worked one hour got thirty dollars. The men at the back of the line who had been working twelve hours figured that they would get more money than that because they had worked so much longer. But when they got paid, all they got was thirty dollars too. Now this didn't set too well with the twelve hour workers. "Why did these guys who worked only one hour in the cool of the evening get the same amount of money that we who worked twelve hours in the hot sun got?" That didn't seem fair! But the owner of the vineyard had a good point. "Listen buddy," he said. "Didn't we agree on thirty dollars a day this morning? You got what you bargained for. Now take yours and get out of here! Your just mad because of someone else's good luck." How in the world is this story like the Kingdom of God?

Our reaction to this story is just like the twelve hour workers. "It's just not fair!" How can it possibly be fair to pay everyone the same regardless of how much work they did? Didn't that landowner know that the twelve hour workers were worth much more than those one hour workers? Unfair! It is against our sense of justice. What do you think would happen if that sort of thing went on in a factory today! People would be standing outside with picket signs painted in big bold letters, "Unfair!" Union leaders would be demanding a strike charging the company with unfair labor practices. The labor force would walk off the job, and negotiations would begin between labor and management in order to make fair payment for an honest day's work. I preached a sermon on this story once in another church and afterwards one of the deacons came to see me. He was an assembly line worker in a factory, a union man for at least thirty years. "You shouldn'ta preached on that story," he said with utmost seriousness. "Why not?" I asked in naïve ignorance. "Because I don't like that story," he said. "That story is wrong," he insisted, and I resisted the temptation of telling him to take that up with Jesus instead of me. Yet there is something in his complaint, you know. This whole story that Jesus told is an insult to our sense of fairness. "Unfair" we would shout.

Well the twelve hour workers in the story thought it was unfair too. And they didn't waste time in lodging a complaint at the local union hall. When the union negotiators went to the landowner to express the feelings of the workers, do you know what happened? The owner wouldn't bargain at all. He wouldn't even sit down at the table with them. He said that if they weren't happy about their wages they could just come pick up their checks and get out. He would just fire the whole lot of them. Now that's not quite what the workers had in mind. They thought that they could put enough pressure on company management that the management would have to give in to their demands. They thought they had the power, they believed the bargaining chips were in their control. But then - - instead of getting a raise, they get axed! What do you think would happen if all of the writers out in Hollywood suddenly found out that instead of getting a raise that their protests ended up in a pink slip? Somebody would not be too happy! And here in this story, it seems that management had the upper hand. "Just take what I give you and get out of here," the landowner said. The twelve hour workers, of course thought this was terribly unfair. And so do we.

Is God unfair? After all, didn't Jesus tell this story to illustrate what God is like? We don't like to think of God being as unfair as this landowner. We want God to be the perfect judge of people. A God who pays our rewards fairly for the work

that we do for him. But when we look around, we may well come to the conclusion that indeed, God is unfair. Think about some of the most faithful and hardest working people for God that you know. They are faithful to the church, they witness to people about Christ, and they help the poor. But they are faced with the same problems as everyone else. They can't pay all their bills, their children turn out bad, they are plagued with illness. It seems like they never get a fair deal, they never get good wages for all their work for the Lord. **Sometimes it seems like God treats us like the guy who is the first in the office every morning, is the last to leave every night, never takes a day off, slaves through lunch hour, and then the inevitable day comes when the boss summons him into his office and says, "I've been watching your work very carefully." The workers smiles expecting a raise and a promotion. Instead, the boss just says, "What in the world are you up to, anyway?"** Sometimes it seems like God doesn't pay us off for all the hard work we do for him, you know what I mean? And yet we all know people who never step inside the doors of a church who never seem to have a problem in the world, life is great, blessings flow and it makes us angry. Sometimes it even makes us hate those who seem to be getting by with little or no work for the Lord. And whether we like to think about God in such a way or not, we are often tempted to cry out in protest, "Unfair!" Is God unfair?

Has our life with God become nothing more than a negotiated bargain? Is our relationship with God just a business deal where record keeping becomes more important than relationship? We promise God our work and our faith for a reward in heaven. All we want is a fair deal. Maybe that's our problem with God sometimes. He has become nothing more than some cosmic employer that owes us a mansion in the sky in exchange for a little faith. Maybe that's why we cry out, "God is Unfair" when life strikes its hard blows. Maybe that's why we can't get along with our neighbors or even other Christians. God seems to have made a better deal with them that he did with me! It's like an athlete who can't get along with management or teammates because someone got a better contract than they did. There's no doubt about it. When our relationship to God becomes nothing more than some negotiated contract, God is unfair. All we want is a fair deal.

But the more we think about it, is fairness really what we want from God? Do we really want to receive what we deserve? It seems to me that God did make a bargain with us when we began life's journey. He said, "The wages of sin is death." That's what the contract says. And who among us has never sinned'?

We think we want God to be fair, but when we really get down to the nuts and bolts of the contract, I don't think we do want God to be fair. Now we can, of course, insist on fairness. We can organize a union and carry picket signs that protest in bold letters, "Unfair." But God will say to those protesters, "Just take the terms of the deal and get out of my kingdom! Take what's coming to you and get out of my church!" Do we really want to live by the bargain? Do we really want God to be fair?

God's world is a world that is not ruled by what is fair. God's world is ruled by grace. It is ruled by the undeserved wages for those who have never really lived up to the bargain in the first place. Of course, in our world we don't live like that. We live by what is fair "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work." But God's world is not like our world. God gives graciously to those who have not earned it. When Jesus came to earth to announce the breakthrough of the Kingdom of God, he was announcing, "The bargaining time with God is over. No longer are we going to live with God in a bargain, but we will live with God only because he will pay even those who do not deserve payment." And that is all of us. And then Jesus died on a cross to put an end to the bargain. The cross was the deal breaker.

A remarkable thing happened once day on a neighborhood baseball diamond in Brooklyn, New York. One afternoon, Shaya and his father walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew, were playing baseball. Shaya asked, "Do you think they will let me play?" Shaya was both mentally and physically disabled and his father knew that his son was not at all athletic and that most boys would not want him on their team. But Shaya's father approached one of the boys and asked if Shaya could play. Well, the boy said, "We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."

In the bottom of the eighth inning Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again and now with two outs and the bases loaded with the potential winning run on base, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Shaya bat at this juncture and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible because Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However, as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shaya should at least be able to make contact. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya to show him how to swing

the bat. Shaya faced the pitcher waiting for the next pitch. As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung the bat and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have ended the game. Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far beyond reach of the first baseman.

Everyone started yelling, "Shaya run to first. Run to first!" Never in his life had Shaya run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag out Shaya, who was still running. But the right fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions were, so he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second." Shaya ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases towards home.

As Shaya reached second base, the opposing short stop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base and shouted, "Run to third." As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya, run home!" Shaya ran home, and stepped on home plate. All 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team. Admittedly, it wasn't really fair. Shaya did not and could not live up to the deal. What he received was grace. Grace is never fair. But that's how it is in God's world.

Well, once again Jesus has turned around the way we think about God. He has told us that God is unfair. It is a fact that at first makes us angry, for it cuts into our sense of justice upon which our world is based. But this story that made us angry is really a story that should make us jump for joy. We do not and we can not live up to the deal. What we get instead is grace.