

Septuagesima, A ✕ D 2010

Matthew 20:1-16

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 A young pastor, just a few weeks beyond his ordination, received a phone call from a man claiming to be a member of the pastor's parish. The 94-year-old man wanted the pastor to come for a visit. The pastor scheduled a visit for later in the day, jotted down the man's address, and hung up the phone. Unfamiliar with the name, the pastor went first to the congregation's membership directory. Not finding the man's name there, the pastor went to the files of former members. There, among the lists of members who had passed away, disappeared, or left the congregation was a record for this man, but it indicated that he had ceased to be a member over 30 years ago. The pastor nevertheless went to the visit as scheduled. When he inquired what happened to the man these past thirty years, supposing him to have been removed from membership for delinquency, the man answered, "Pastor, I'm ninety-four years old, and I'm dying. Your congregation excommunicated me a long time ago, probably before you were born, but I need to straighten things out before I die." They talked for some time about the man's past sins. The dying man displayed genuine remorse but was worried he waited too long to be welcomed back. After the man confessed his sins, the pastor pronounced God's word of Holy Absolution. The pastor returned the next week for a time of catechesis to welcome the man back into communion fellowship, as well. A couple days after his second visit, the man died. The pastor performed the rite of Christian burial for him, and he was buried in the congregation's cemetery.

2 There were several in the congregation no little bit upset. The man hadn't even entered the building for over thirty years, and he was given a Christian burial and a space in the congregation's cemetery. Only at the very end of his life was he demonstrably a Christian, but he was welcomed as if he had been a lifelong member.

3 Perhaps that's a mild example, one that doesn't get under your skin. Consider Ted Bundy. He's the serial killer who murdered at least 26 women, probably many more. He cut a swath of bloodshed from Seattle to Miami, leaving innumerable people grieving the loss of loved ones. He was sentenced to death in 1980. He was executed by the State of Florida in 1989. On the evening before his execution, Bundy met with Dr. James Dobson. Bundy talked chiefly about the devastating effect pornography played in his life, desensitizing him to violence, and leaving him addicted to it like a drug. At the end of the interview, Dobson and Bundy spoke of the Bundy's conversion to Christianity and the comfort he found from knowing his sins were forgiven.

4 You were willing to believe in a God who could welcome an elderly man back into the fellowship of the church after thirty years of impenitence. But what about a God who would forgive a serial killer? Some people cite this very example and declare that they could never believe in a God who would allow a person to murder twenty-six people and repent at the very end of his life and forgive all those heinous sins. That God would forgive such a person and damn someone who lived a supposedly "basically good" life—free from outward murder and

adultery, at least—and yet never had faith in God makes people mad. What about you? Could you believe in such a God?

5 Against such an attitude, Jesus told this parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius[a] a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last.”

6 The workers who showed up at the start of the work day were understandably irate. They only received as much pay as those hired last who worked only an hour. It's the same reaction some Christians have when hearing that a lifelong sinner is welcomed into the fellowship of the congregation on his death bed and given all the rights and privileges of membership in the church even when he had done nothing to support the congregation. It's the same attitude as those outside the church who hear with chagrin of a God who would welcome a serial killer into heaven but would cast into hell a fairly good person who had no faith. It's your attitude every time you begrudge the fact that no one seems to work quite as hard around church as you do, or put quite as big a percentage in the offering plate, or show up as many Sundays in a row as you do, and who yet nevertheless reap all the benefits of congregational membership and who are presumably Christians just like you. But that attitude, which is the attitude of every sinner, underestimates the gift of God and overestimates your self-worth. Repent.

7 To be a Christian, you must acknowledge you are no more deserving of God's mercy and forgiveness than any serial killer or rapist, than any Jonny-come-lately Christian, than anyone else. To be a Christian, you must acknowledge that eternal life is far more than you can earn. To be a Christian is to acknowledge that you share the same sinful nature with every murder and wife beater and no more deserve eternal life than they do. Repent. Do not overestimate your self-worth by supposing you could earn the denarius of eternal life by working hard. Nor underestimate the gift of eternal life by supposing it is something of which you are worthy. Most of all, do not disqualify yourself from God's freely-offered grace by demanding fairness.

8 Christianity is not about fairness, nor about self-worth. In fact, God hates fairness. He is a God of mercy, not fairness, of grace, not fairness. He hates fairness so much that He sent His Son to die. The central teaching of Christianity is one of gross unfairness. God became man to die in the place of sinners. The sinless Jesus dealt with human sinfulness by becoming sin in your place, by being punished in your place. Nothing could be less fair. That's grace.

9 You are perfectly free to demand fairness. If you want fairness, you will get fairness. Fairness is to expect you to answer for each sin on your own. Freedom is to have your sins answered for by another. That's how it is in the Master's vineyard: not fair. Do you begrudge this generosity, that the Lord would give to you what cannot be earned? No, it's not fair. The wage is too high. There's no merit in the vineyard, only grace. And while you're here, you're free to work, free to labor in the Lord's vineyard where the wage is guaranteed no matter the effort. Instead of working for what's fair, you have been given what is unfair. This sets you free to work in the vineyard, to work just as hard as if your salvation depended on it but to know with certainty that it does not. Let the world worry about fairness. You are free. Free to endure slander and shame, free not to begrudge wrongs done to you, free to forgive as you have been forgiven, free to work joyfully in the master's vineyard, free to celebrate every new batch of laborers brought in. You share a secret: the gift is bigger—tremendously bigger—than any you could earn, no matter when you come.

10 Whether you come at the first hour or the last, the beginning of life or the end, while you are here, you enjoy the fruit of Another's labor. The forgiveness Jesus won on the cross has been delivered to you in real, perceptible ways, through God's Word and Sacraments. In the water of Holy Baptism, in the word of Holy Absolution, in the Proclamation of the Gospel, in the Body and Blood of Jesus under bread and wine in the Holy Communion, you have the incomparable riches of forgiveness and eternal life. Nothing here is fair. Everything is free. The gift is bigger than you can even comprehend. The unfairness of it all is its beauty.

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Pastor Jeff Hemmer