

**“Be the Church”**

**Matthew 20:1-16, Jonah 3:10-4:11**

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In 1932, the Chicago Cubs went to the World Series. Unfortunately for the Cubs, they had to play against one of the great New York Yankee teams, led by Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. It was a fairly nasty World Series, mainly because the Cubs had acquired a new shortstop in August, a ballplayer by the name of Mark Koenig. Koenig happened to be a former Yankee and had played with Ruth and Gehrig on the 1927 Yankees, perhaps the greatest baseball team of all time. But, now in 1932, as the Cubs prepared to go to the World Series, a question arose about Koenig. You see, Koenig had not played the entire year with the Cubs. This was now an issue because, when a team made it to the World Series, each player was given a bonus check, about \$5200 for the winners of the series and \$4200 for the losing team. In 1932, that was a lot of money, especially during the Depression. (Just to compare, the 2016 Cubs each received \$368,000) So the Cubs players decided before the Series started that since Koenig had only come in August, that he wasn't deserving of a full World Series share and so they voted to only give him a half-share. When Babe Ruth went up to Koenig before the first game of the Series to greet his old friend, he stood in front of the Cubs dugout, shook Koenig's hand, and—as only the Babe could—said loudly, “Some cheapskates you play with, Mark!”

Were they? Were the Cubs being cheap? Or greedy? Or were they really just being fair? It was true that Koenig had not played the whole year with them, so isn't it a fair question to ask: Why should he get a full share? The other players were there all season long, working together to get

the team in position to go to the series. And August is pretty late in the baseball year, so how much did Koenig really contribute? Why does he deserve the same as the rest of them?

You can see the connection to the parable. And as we are in the playoffs now and the Cubs are once again in contention for the series, this seems almost serendipitous to this Cubs fan/preacher that today's lesson can be illustrated with a baseball story!

So...is this about fairness?

It *wasn't* fair for the landowner to give to the laborers who had only worked one hour, the same as he gave to those who had worked all day, was it?

Well... let's look at it a different way.

First, we must understand some history. In Matthew's time this was a question for the church. Matthew's community was predominantly Jewish but as their community grew and this new form of Judaism became less Jewish in nature and more a new religion, Christianity, the faith attracted Gentiles. But those of Jewish roots began to question what to do with these Gentiles. These new members of the faith community hadn't been circumcised, and they didn't have a grasp of the basic tenets of Judaism. Why should they have equal standing with the pillars of the community, good Jewish families who came to Christianity through their Judaism, which many believed was the best way or even the right way to become a Christian?

How is this fair?

The people who had been part of the community their whole lives, who had grown up Jewish, had been faithful in their religious practices, maybe they had even known Jesus; are now part of a church with some people who only recently came to the faith. Do they get rewarded the same?

If the “usual daily wage” in this parable is an allegory for salvation, is it fair that those who have been faithful their whole lives and those who have only recently become part of the church, both get into heaven? Is that fair?

The landowner asks the aggrieved laborer who had worked all day, *If you didn't know about these other laborers, would you not have been perfectly happy because I gave you what was promised to you?*

So why can it stick in our craw when someone else gets the same reward we do? Especially if we are sure we deserve it more or they don't deserve it at all.

It's like the old joke about heaven: St. Peter greets you at the pearly gates and tells you what rooms the others are in—the Catholics are in room #3, the Lutherans are meeting down the hall in room #5, but the Presbyterians are in a separate building entirely because they like to think they are the only ones here...

Of course, that joke can be told with any denomination being the punch line, but we need to be able to laugh at ourselves and admit that at some base level, when we fail to be our better selves, we take a certain pleasure in being the ones who were right, the one with the medal, the one who is special...

But this parable is not meant to make us feel exceptional, to shore up the justice argument presented by the aggrieved laborer. It is not about fairness... or works...

So, what *is* it about?

This parable is about *grace*.

We are all equal recipients of God's grace, regardless of who we are or how long we have been faithful. Whether we are a member...of this church or any other church, or any church at all... And we don't always like that. We are tempted to resent that which is given to someone else, that which we think is undeserved.

So... if this parable is about grace, then what is getting in the way of grace?

You remember that 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment, don't you? *You shall not covet. Don't covet your neighbor's house or his or her spouse or their car or their boat or anything else that belongs to your neighbor. Don't covet.* The landowner was showing all his workers grace but some began to covet that which didn't belong to them, that which was neither their's to claim or give away; the payroll belonged to the landowner, not them.

And grace belongs to God. Who are we to decide who receives it?

The lesson is summed up in words of the landowner, "***are you envious because I am generous?***"

Envy.

Envy blinds us, keeps us from appreciating God's grace. We look around us and we see someone that has more than we do—more money, a better house, more happiness, better looks, a better marriage, a better life—and it can make us envious.

But we don't just envy those things that might make us feel more successful or be more enviable to other people. Envy can also be found in the resentment we feel when we think someone is getting something they don't deserve, too much assistance from another; we think they are taking advantage. Why don't they help themselves? Why should we keep helping others when we have needs here, in our own home, our own church, our own country?

Why do we envy them? Why do we covet the grace they receive? Are we afraid that—if *we* were in need—we wouldn't get the same? Ultimately, isn't envy less about looking at what others have and more about looking at ourselves and what we *don't* have, or fear we *won't* have if needed, or what we have but might *lose* when we most need it. When we are envious we are caught up in our insecurities and lack the faith that God's grace is there for us too. Someone else's successes, or maybe their receipt of help doesn't have to threaten us. Can I, instead, look at another and say, "It's wonderful that she is successful, that he can take it easy, that they are happy together, that their family seems so contented," without comparing them to myself? Can I say, I am glad this family regularly gets helps from the food pantry rather than count the amount of times they come, wonder why they don't ever change anything about their lives. and judge them for taking advantage, judge the church for continuing to help them...

Yes, I can. We all can. And the shortest path from envy to grace is to look at what we *do* have. To practice being grateful. To look at the grace of God in our lives and be grateful. It has been said that you cannot be envious and grateful at the same time. Think about that...

This week, I read about a pastor who had his congregation think about the state of being envious. He then had them write down on a card an example of their problem with envy, something they struggle with. What it feels like when they are envious—the resentment, anger. He then had them consider gratitude and he had them write down on another card what gratitude looks like, maybe an example of something they were grateful for, a blessing, or what gratitude feels like when you consider what it is that God has graced them with. They were told to hold the cards in each hand, to concentrate on them, how each made them feel. Which one felt heavier to hold up? Then, when the offering plates came around, he asked them to give one of them up, give it God. Which one did they want to take home and which one did they want to give up? We may think the

answer is obvious—we'd give away the heavier burden—the one that turn's our stomach or keeps us up at night—but the world wouldn't be hurting this much if giving up that which rots us from the inside were so easily purged.

We struggle as individuals, and we struggle as a church as well. When we start to think about what another church has that we don't, we forget why God has called *us* and the grace we are shown every day. When we start to think about who is one of us and who is not, we forget that Jesus came to call *all* to be part of God's family. When we worry so much about how the rest of the world sees us, we become preoccupied with our own reflection and we forget that the church is meant to look not upon itself—getting trapped in the beauty of our own reflection or worrying about what we don't have—but the church is called to set its eyes outward upon a hurting world.

This parable is perfectly matched in the lectionary to the parable of Jonah. Sandra just read for us part of the story of Jonah, who was called to give a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh, the traditional enemies of Israel. But he doesn't want to, so he runs away and takes a ship in the opposite direction. When God has him swallowed by a big fish and thrown up on the shore, he grudgingly goes to Nineveh and delivers the message. When the people repent and God forgives them, Jonah complains and says, *for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.* Jonah, who had earlier declared that *deliverance belongs to the Lord* (a deliverance he himself has experienced) is resentful, envious, of the grace God is showing another.<sup>1</sup> He doesn't want the Ninevites to be forgiven, to be included. This Jonah passage tells us that the God of the people of Israel is really the God of *all* people. Jonah doesn't like how that feels. He is coveting the blessing. Just like the laborers in the vineyard coveted. Just like us.

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1 Jacobsen, Karl. *WorkingPreacher.org*. September 18, 2011.

When we covet we cannot truly be The Church; When we are envious of another, we cannot truly be The Church.

We might not have written down our own personal experiences of envy and blessing today, but I want to take a moment to imagine we have. Think of something that you are envious about and when you are ready I want you to imagine it is in your left hand. Some of you might find this exercise easier if you close your eyes. Take a few seconds to consider what this envy might be: what makes you jealous or resentful...Is it in your hand?

Now imagine something that you feel grateful for—a sign of God's grace in your life—and when you are ready, imagine placing your gratitude in your right hand...

Which hand feels heavier? Which is lighter?

As you hold them consider how these are competing feelings, they don't complement one another. They compete for your heart—one making it heavy, and unable to move, it sticks like a brick in your stomach—while the other lightens your heart, you have more room to breathe, you feel a freedom to respond to a hurting world.

Now decide which one you are going to give up. If you can, let it go...now, if you feel ready...

Or maybe you need to imagine yourself placing it in the offering plate, giving it to God. Or maybe this is the kind of personal exercise you'd prefer to do on your own time, in your own way and you'd prefer to be alone in the sanctuary, your home, a favorite spot outside... however you choose to do, I encourage you, try it. Free yourself by giving your envy over to God.

Replace it by pouring gratitude into your heart, let God's grace free you so we can turn our eyes toward a hurting world.

Last week, a bunch of the youth were in church (I'm sure you noticed) and their theme for the year is "Be the Church," and they had shirts that reflect what they mean by that. Did you notice their shirts? Did you read what they said on the back?

Be the church:

Protect the environment.

Care for the poor.

Forgive often.

Reject racism.

Fight for the powerless.

Share earthly and spiritual resources.

Embrace diversity.

Love God.

Enjoy this life.

We can't do those things if we are concerned about whether or not we're getting our fair share.

We can either be envious or grateful. Pick one. I hope you'll pick the one that allows us to be

The Church.