

# The (un)Fair Kingdom

## **In the Garden: Delight**

**Matthew 20: 1-16**

Salem United Methodist Church

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\*All sermons by Rev. Emily are written to be read aloud. Grammar and spelling will reflect her speech patterns. This is provided for anyone who may have trouble hearing or understanding without a written record to follow along. God bless you.

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Like last week and the week before last, this scripture is likely familiar to most of us. We love the story where everything is fair. We love it when we get to say the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Anyone said this to elementary school students standing in line?

“Hey there, little Emily, you’re misbehaving... so remember, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” Insert finger wagging here!

Can you imagine I needed to hear that often??

But, as with the scriptures we’ve been reading, this only makes sense with a surface level reading. There is more to this scripture than we can share with kids in Sunday School. This can be deep... and deeply offensive. I mean, think about it. They worked totally different amounts and got paid the same. We’re seeing this in our real-world context right now! With totally different responses.

We’ve seen this in the unemployment checks. In the household stimulus checks. There are people who are livid that people making minimum wage or less are now making more money for not working than for working!

Is that not the same as what’s happening in the scripture.

You all have to remember... I’m new here. I don’t know your religious or political views. I can’t tailor a message to you and your hearts. All I can do is tell you what I see in the Gospel text and how it can apply to our lives. If the Gospel is only abstract, then really, what good is it?

If the Gospel is only about your internal world, then why did Jesus bother to feed the people? Why have a tangible symbol of grace and salvation through communion and baptism. The bread and juice are real. The waters of baptism are real. The bread and fish are real.

Jesus doesn’t let the people get stuck in their heads and somehow forget that our real lives matter. And our real lives matter to God. So what we do in church, as we proclaim and

internalize the Gospel, we can be reforming our minds and souls so that our *lived lives* are oriented around the Gospel.

So, I have to talk about real examples. I have to look for ways the scripture talks to our lives right now. I'm not trying to be political. You won't hear me tell you how to vote. I want to paint a picture of what I see.

I see this scripture playing out before my eyes. I see the people who are working their butts off getting paid the same as the people who have been asked to take 6 months off. Chris told me about this just the other day! He has a friend who was asked to stay home for the last 6 months. Chris has been working on/off weeks the whole time. His friend finally got back to work and yet! He has a ton of vacation saved up! So, he's talking with Chris about his challenge about how he'll figure out what to do with all his time off.

With Chris. Who worked the whole time without extra vacation. Who's "thank you" was a free lunch that was shared with everyone-including the people who had been off.

It's not fair.

So... what's going on here? We tend to tell this story as a fluffy example of God's fairness. But what its about God's Unfairness? What if it's a story about the Radically UnFair Kingdom of God?

To understand, we need to zoom out a bit. Remember, we're talking about fairness this month. I wanted to talk about delight to round out my first 90 days, but it looks like the delight of the kingdom of God is more complex than just fuzzy feelings. Because the Kingdom is clearly unfair.

So, fairness. We zoom out in the text and we meet the rich young ruler. Another familiar story. He approaches Jesus and asks how he can get eternal life. Jesus tells him to follow the commandments. The young man says he already has. Jesus tells him to sell everything and follow. The young man goes away sad because he was very rich. That's interesting, sure, but the next bit is fascinating. The disciples are perplexed! Jesus tells them that its easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven.

They say, "Then who can be saved?!" Peter, ah Peter. He says, "Look. We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

Uh oh.

Right?

Hey now. I gave up everything. I did everything you said to do. Everything. And here I am. Are you telling me I still can't go to heaven? What gives?

You'll have to read the story-its right before our scripture for today!

But then Jesus says, "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Ah! A clue! That's how our passage for today ends. They are linked.

So, now, we know that the disciples are feeling a little left out. A little... under appreciated. You see, they volunteered at the yard sale all day. They staked out the free tables and helped get rid of things. They set up before and cleaned up afterwards. And they just found out that they may not even get a reward at all.

So Jesus tells them a story of the workers in the vineyard.

The workers who showed up early and did the most of the work. They agree to work for a denarius. Normal daily wage for a day worker.

Then, another group. Also paid "what is right."

And a final group. The last group. They don't show up until the work is almost done. Also paid, "what is right."

And then, the landowner ends the day with a performance, for some reason. He ends the day by showing what everyone is paid. One, by one.

The last people are paid, a denarius!

So, the first people are amazed! They're tired. They've worked since the crack of dawn. They see this pay and they wonder... man, I wonder what he's got for us! He REALLY values our work!

But then the next group is the same. And then they're the same.

Suddenly, the denarius promised at the beginning of the day looks like a cheap trick.

You mean I could have been in the group who stayed home?

You mean I could have been off for 6 months and still accruing vacation time?

You mean I could have gotten laid off last year, applied for unemployment, and then been paid comfortably for all this time?

Everyone is somehow treated the same.

When we're at the bottom, we are grateful. When we're at the top, we feel cheated. It depends on our perspective.

Because, really, this isn't fair. But this is God's kingdom.

So many of us have an abundance when there are people who do not have enough. God's kingdom has its own rules for fairness. In God's kingdom everyone has enough before anyone has an abundance.

And it is offensive. Especially to people who had to work like crazy to get to where they are. Especially to people who had to climb and fight and work to get their vineyard job. If you had to claw your way to security, then you may be feeling offended by this passage.

“You mean they don’t even need to do... anything??”

And if you are clawing, and clawing and trying to just get by and you see people being offended that the folks who are trying to survive are given a breather? You may be offended by their offense.

“Why would you object to someone getting help? Our country is set up to help some people more than others! Help them, certainly!”

I see it playing out in our world *right now*.

Its offensive.

And if this parable played out in our context right now it would make the news on all channels! It would be a political statement. It would be partisan. It would make people angry!

This is an offensive parable in the middle of an offensive story about an offensive God.

Jesus will always offend your sensibilities if you are paying attention.

Grace is offensive.

It is free. It is offered to everyone. You can’t earn it. We all get the same amount—and its more than we’ll ever need.

We like it when we’re receiving it. It sounds nice. But the parable of the workers in the vineyard is also a parable about grace.

And if you’re not offended? If you aren’t offended by God’s radical offer of grace to even the people who don’t deserve it? Well I’m going to try to convince you that you should be.

I think Jesus was trying to offend them. He tells them this story in the midst of them saying they’ve given up everything to follow him. In the midst of traveling to Jerusalem. Shortly after last week’s scripture on radical forgiveness.

Then he tells them this story saying, the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Then. They start traveling to Jerusalem. And Jesus starts to predict his own death. He says he will be handed over to the priests and scribes and they will condemn him to death. Then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.

And the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Its all right here in the Bible! It’s one story after another. Its not organized haphazardly! The Bible is organized so the stories form a cohesive whole. It MATTERS that Jesus is talking about his crucifixion in this context.

Look at this! Who are the people who have worked the longest? Cradle Christians who were baptized before they were a month old? NO! Jesus has worked the longest! Our triune God has worked the longest! That's who was hired first and started the work. In the beginning was the Word and the word was with God and the Word was God. In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep!

God has been working in the vineyard since the beginning of TIME!

We have just been given our roles now.

And we will receive the same reward as Christ. There is no way that's fair.

And-don't forget-the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Wasn't Christ, the very first of all, made to be last? Did he not accept his own mocking, flogging, and crucifixion? Did he not accept his public death for a wrongful accusation?

We should certainly be offended by this.

He became the last. So that we could be first.

This kind of reversal isn't seen in almost any other ancient God narratives. We humans don't want our God's to be weak or gentle. Our God is unique in taking on weakness and suffering in order to save us.

This last/first first/last cycle changes everything. Jesus took it all on in Himself. He was first and last at the same time.

And that's the Good News. We showed up really late to work. We weren't, and aren't capable of working even a single full day in the kingdom. We are the people who are left over.

And we are still given exactly as much grace as we need. Even though we do not deserve it. Even though we cannot earn it. No more and no less than what we need. And it's not fair. But that's the Kingdom.

Thanks be to God! Amen.