

**First Congregational Church of Wakefield, United Church of Christ**

*The Rev. John Tamilio III, Pastor*

*Sunday, September 22, 2002 — Pentecost XVIII*

Sermon: "Is God Unfair?" (Matthew 20:1-16)

Is God unfair? This is a question that we often ask when we feel as if fate has dealt us a bad hand: when one is diagnosed with inoperable cancer or when a loved one dies long before his time. My father's younger brother, the one we have been praying for over the past several months, my uncle Chi Chi died Thursday morning. He was just sixty years old. When people die, everyone always remembers the good things about their lives; they never remember the bad. Everyone sounds like a saint when eulogized, but my uncle was as close to a saint as you get. He lived a simple and modest life. He was a lobster man off the coast of Gloucester. He had four kids and a wife who suffers from severe MS. He was literally someone who would do anything for anybody, even total strangers. Nine months ago, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Since then, his life slowly ebbed away. Although it is a blessing that he is not suffering anymore, many people in my family are saying, "It isn't fair. He was so young and he was such a nice man."

In a sense, they are right. It isn't fair. Now whether one wants to debate if this was God's will or not is another story. Whether it was or whether it wasn't, people often feel that in situations like this God is unfair. I don't need to tell you this. You've all experienced this feeling before. Everyone has an Uncle Chi Chi. But how often do we say that God is unfair when it comes to the good things in life? More often than you'd think.

Years ago, when I worked at Salem State College, I was talking with a group of students after class one day. One student, a born again Christian, said to the others, "If you believe in Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior and truly repent for your sins, then you will be saved. That's it. It's that simple." "So," another student inquired, "what about the atheist on death row? If he becomes a Christian and repents for his sins at the last minute, is he saved?" "Sure," the first student said. "If he believes in Jesus and he is truly sorry for what he did." "That's not fair," the second student said. "So an ax murderer can receive the same reward as someone who attended church her entire life and truly lived her faith?" "That's right," the first student said. "That's not fair!" her classmate exclaimed again.

That's not fair. That is the same complaining that we heard in today's Gospel Lesson from Matthew.

I love this parable. As old as it is, it is so contemporary and it shines as much light on the grace of God as it does on the human condition. Let me place it in a different context for more force. Let's say that I owned a huge field — three times the size of the field behind the Denley's house — and let's say that field was filled with apple trees: hundreds and hundreds of them. It's starting to get late in the fall and I want to harvest them so that they will not rot and so the deer won't eat them. I call

you, Ed Morrison, on the telephone and ask, "What are you doing this Saturday? I'll tell you what, if you will come to my house early Saturday morning and collect apples all day, I'll give you three hundred dollars." You say "Sure" and show up at seven o'clock to start working. It just so happens that it is an unseasonably warm day, like one of these strange, humid days that we have been having this month. You work all day in the heat, gathering bushels and bushels of apples. About nine o'clock, I go to the Sanbornville post office to get my mail and I see a few people standing around outside doing nothing. I invite them to come work in my field for the day and they agree. At noontime I run to Lovell Lake to pick up some groceries and see a couple kids hanging out front with their skateboards. I ask them if they want to come work in my field for the day as well and they agree. *(I know that this is a bit unrealistic, but work with me here.)* I basically do the same thing at three o'clock and at five o'clock.

7:00 PM finally rolls around. It's been a long day. Ed has been working in the field for twelve hours. He is tired and wants nothing more than to collect his pay, go home, take a shower, and go to sleep. Everyone gathers behind the barn. At first, I call the ones who started working at five o'clock forward and pay them three hundred dollars a piece. Then I call the ones who started working at three o'clock and I pay them the same: three hundred dollars. I do the same with the kids who started working at noon and with the people who started at nine. I pay everyone three hundred dollars. Then, I call Edward forward, and I pay him three hundred dollars. What do you think Ed would say? "IT ISN'T FAIR!" And rightly so. He has been working for twelve hours and has received the exact same pay as the ones who worked for only two hours. What if I were to respond, "Wait a minute. I agreed to pay you three hundred dollars for twelve hours of labor and I did as per our agreement. The fact that I chose to pay the same amount to those that worked less than you is my business. Am I not allowed to do what I want with my own money?" This probably is not going to make Ed feel any better. He will probably still say, "It isn't fair!"

And he is right. It isn't fair. Fairness is when people receive what they have earned: no more; no less. This fits our notion of justice. If 300 dollars is a fair wage for twelve hours of labor, then 3,000 dollars is just as unfair as 3 dollars for the same amount of work — and so is 300 dollars for two hours worth of work. It is unfair — and that my friends is exactly the way God's grace is: it is unfair, but is unfair in a positive way.

Some people spend their entire lives worshipping and serving God, and living according to the teachings of the Bible — and they receive a just reward: the gift of salvation. But then there are others who find religion later in life, some at the end of their lives, and they receive the same reward: eternal salvation. The ones who followed God all their lives do not receive a bigger and better mansion in heaven than those who came to God late in life. Everyone gets the same thing. God's grace is distributed equally no matter when we find faith. In our competitive society, though, we have a problem with this. We think that those who labor more deserve more. The operative line in this parable though is where the landowner says to the disgruntled workers, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" This is a very important and a very profound line. Not only does it relate to what we have been

talking about — that God can do what God pleases with God’s grace, even if it means an unfair distribution according to our standards of fairness — but it also reminds us of whose grace it is. It is God’s grace that God chooses to bestow upon us.

There are two basic schools of thought when it comes to salvation. Some people think that we are saved based on what we believe: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved,” Paul told the Romans.<sup>1</sup> Jesus says basically the same thing throughout the Gospels. But there are an equal number of passages throughout the New Testament — in the Gospels, in the letters of Paul, and in the Letter of James — which suggest that salvation is also based on what we do: our works. Some people struggle with this, because it suggests that salvation is something we earn through our deeds. The same thing can be said about faith: salvation is something we earn through what we believe. Two things. First, I agree with the seventeenth century British philosopher John Locke who linked the two. In his book, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke wrote: “These two, faith and repentance, i.e. believing Jesus to be the Messiah, and a good life, are the indispensable conditions of the new covenant, to be performed by all those who obtain eternal life.”<sup>2</sup> Notice how salvation works in Locke’s system: faith and good works come after salvation. They are “the indispensable conditions of the new covenant, to be performed by all those who obtain eternal life.” This leads us to the second point. Salvation is not something we earn: it is a gift from God. Our faith and our good works should not be seen so much as the cause of our salvation, but as the result of our salvation. Nothing we can say, believe, or do is strong enough to redeem us. Only God can do that.

Yet we remain competitive — and we make salvation an exclusive club. Often times, we are just like the laborers in the vineyard trying to decide who should be saved and who shouldn’t and doling out redemption as if it were ours to give! This is the height of self-righteousness. Isn’t God’s grace big enough for everybody? Shouldn’t we rejoice over the fact that God’s grace is distributed in a way that our system of justice considers unfair, allowing the first to be last and the last to be first? Shouldn’t we be overjoyed that God’s arms are big enough to embrace all of us, regardless of when we chose to embrace God? You’d be surprised at how many people would say no — and that is why God’s love and grace are so radical. They break the boundaries of fairness that we create and the borders we build to try to restrict it.

In many respects, the answer to the question we have been asking is *no* — God is not fair. Thanks be to God that this is so! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 10:9.

<sup>2</sup> John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 44-45.