Sunday, September 22, 1996
GRACE IS NOT FAIR
Matthew 20:1-16

In the sermons from the past two weeks, I've noted that the Christian faith can be described in several ways — in terms of its history and organization, as a set of ethical principles, or as a set of doctrines. However, one of the most helpful ways of understanding our faith, as Jesus lived and taught it, is to define it as a new way of looking at things — a new way of seeing God, others, and ourselves. It also gives us a new way of relating to each other.

In last week's sermon, for example, we looked at a new way of understanding forgiveness and noted that from a Christian point of view, forgiveness is not something that is earned. It's not something we hold back until we think someone deserves it. It's not a reward. As followers of Jesus, we forgive others whether we think they deserve it or not. We do that because God continually forgives us. We do not earn God's forgiveness. According to Jesus, God doesn't keep score and say, "Okay, I've forgiven you ten times. That's enough. I'm not going to forgive you anymore." We also forgive others not only because of what it might do for them but because of what it does for us. We gain nothing positive by withholding our forgiveness. By not being forgiving, we become enslaved to our bitterness and resentment, and we block out God's forgiveness.

Continuing the theme of our Christian faith giving us a new way of seeing things, today we are going to examine a new way of seeing and understanding life's fairness and unfairness, and how that relates to God's grace.

Most of us, I think, would agree that there is much in life that is unfair. If life were completely fair, then all of us would be equal in every way — athletic ability, IQ, artistic talent, and more. All of us would be like the people in Garrison Keillor's town of Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.

As Christians, we can acknowledge that life is unfair. Once we do that, then two questions arise. First, where is God in life's unfairness? Second, how do we respond to life's unfairness?

Let's take the second question first. How do we respond to life's unfairness? If we don't pay attention to what Jesus taught and lived, our usual response to life's unfairness is envy. The face of envy is never beautiful. That's why envy is listed as one of the seven deadly sins. We tend to envy people whom we consider better-looking, or who have more money, or live in a nicer home, or have better luck, or a higher-paying job, or any one of many other benefits and privileges which, by comparison, we do not have. We may very well have all we need, but when we compare ourselves to others, we become envious.

Envy also has a mirror image. Have you noticed that when someone you envy gets into trouble or has bad luck, few among us can suppress a feeling of secret satisfaction? A few years ago, I gave a sermon on this subject with a German word as the title: Schadenfreude, which translates to "the sinful pleasure of enjoying others' misfortunes."

We gain nothing positive from envy. It makes us bitter and unhappy. In that way, it's the same as our unwillingness to forgive someone who has hurt us.

One of the most destructive forms of envy today is caused by the widespread false assumption that everyone should be able to do, experience, and enjoy everything that everyone else does.

The worst part of envy is not just feeling bad because of someone else's gifts or good fortune compared to ours — it also causes us to devalue our own gifts.

As I have said before, when I come across someone who is a better preacher than I am, if I become envious, my first tendency is to think of myself as a worse preacher. What I forget is that hearing someone who is a better preacher does not devalue my gift at all. I am the same person I always was. The person who is a better preacher didn't take some of my talent from me and add it to hers. If that were true, it would mean that there is only a certain amount of preaching talent available in the world, and I can only get better by taking some from someone else. That's how insidious envy can be. The fact is, there is an unlimited supply of preaching talent available. My getting better does not make someone else worse.

There's an even more destructive facet to envy. Merely feeling bad because I do not have something another person has is not the worst part of envy. The worst part is when the envious person wishes the other person did not have it, so that I might not feel disadvantaged. Certainly, Jesus knew that one of the most destructive temptations for human beings is envy. Jesus was schooled in the Old Testament, and it contains many stories of envy's destructive aspects. King Saul's envy of the young shepherd David drove him out of his mind. Cain's envy of his brother Abel led him to kill Abel.

Envy is a major character in the parable that Jesus told about the laborers in the vineyard.

The owner of a vineyard needed his grapes picked. Early in the morning, he went to the marketplace to hire workers for the day. They agreed on a fair wage for the day's work. Later in the morning, he returned to hire more workers and told them he would pay a fair wage. At noon and at three o'clock in the afternoon, he hired even more workers. Then, with only an hour remaining, he saw that all the grapes would not be picked, so he went back once more and hired others who had not been able to get work for the day.

In the story, Jesus does not tell us why the owner of the vineyard didn't hire all the available workers early in the morning. Perhaps he wasn't sure he would need them, but as the work progressed, he discovered he needed more help to harvest all the grapes. It could also be that he didn't need the extra workers, but because he was a generous and caring individual, he kept going back to the marketplace to see if there were still people who hadn't been hired by anyone else. Knowing they needed the money to support their families, he gave them a job.

We can assume that all those waiting to work in the marketplace wanted to work and needed the money. It was common in those days for people needing work to come to a central place to be available for anyone needing to hire them for the day.

At the end of the day, the owner told his payroll clerk to pay the workers in reverse order — starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who had worked the most hours. Remember, Jesus said at another time, "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last."

Then came the big surprise. The owner paid each worker a full day's wages, even though some had worked only one hour, some three hours, some six hours, and some twelve hours.

When those who had worked all day discovered that those who worked fewer hours received the same pay, they were furious. It wasn't fair. And they said so.

The owner, hearing their complaints, reminded them that he had not defrauded them in any way. He paid them exactly what they had agreed upon as a fair wage. Then he added: "Why should you be envious because I choose to be generous to those who have stood all day in the marketplace, worrying they would not be able to earn enough to support their families? Why are you so envious of my generosity and their good fortune?"

The same envy is displayed by the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son. He said to his father, "It isn't fair that my younger brother should receive a welcome like this when I have stayed home all these years and worked hard, yet no one ever gave a party in my honor."

There are many things in life that aren't fair, especially when we start comparing. But why does it bother us? Why are we envious when someone else is treated generously, even when we already have enough?

The workers in Jesus' story agreed to work for a certain wage, and they received that wage. What kept them from rejoicing with the others who received the same wage, although they worked a shorter day? Why is it so difficult for us to rejoice at another's good fortune?

Could it be that envy springs from a feeling of insecurity about our own worth as human beings? If we truly felt good about ourselves, would we always be comparing ourselves to others?

Could it be that whenever we are envious of another's gifts, it's because we have not fully recognized our own?

The first lesson this story teaches us is that when we respond to life's unfairness with envy, it does us more harm than good.

The biggest problem with envy as a response to life's unfairness is that it blocks our vision and understanding. When we are envious, we can no longer see the goodness and grace of God. Anyone who looks at God's blessings with one eye, while keeping track of whether others are receiving more with the other, soon becomes incapable of recognizing any blessings at all. We become scorekeepers rather than people who know we are infinitely loved by God.

Now, let's consider our second question: Where is God in life's unfairness? The answer to this question is the main point of the story about the workers in the vineyard. Remember, this story is not advice on how to run a business or how to pay workers. It is a story about God's grace. Jesus began the story by saying, "The realm of God is like the owner of a vineyard who went out early in the morning."

With this story, Jesus reminds us that God loves us equally, despite life's unfairness. If you're a parent, isn't that what you try to do with your children? We don't always succeed, but that's our goal.

This story, like others Jesus told, shows us that we do not earn God's love — it is always given to us unconditionally. God gives us as much love as we need. All we have to do is be open to receiving it.

It's a story that rejects "reward religion." It rejects the heresy that God loves some people more than others because they are more religious, attend the "right" church, or have earned God's love in some way. Too many people still think of religion as something to be done to earn God's favor.

Life is unfair. The good news is that God loves us equally despite life's unfairness. We don't need to compare ourselves to others. God doesn't.

God's grace is not fair. Thank God it isn't. In a sermon earlier this year, I said that I had been asking people, "Do you think life is unfair?" Everyone answered, "Yes." Then I would ask, "Would you want to live in a world that was completely one-hundred percent fair, so that you got everything you deserved?" And everyone answered, "No."

The point is, all of us need the grace of God, and God's grace comes to us in ways we do not expect or deserve. To live in a world with God's grace is far better than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world might make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We might get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that would be, and whether or not we would be satisfied.

A world with God's grace gives us more than we deserve. Amen.