Book 32

Sunday September 22, 1996

GRACE IS NOT FAIR Matthew 20:1-16

In the sermons for the previous two weeks, I've noted that the Christian faith can be described in a number of 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 any more." We also forgive others not only because of what it might do for them, but also because of what it does for us. We gain nothing positive by withholding our forgiveness of someone. 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, I.Q., artistic talent and more. All of us would be like the people in Garrison Keillor's town, 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 there are two questions we need to consider. First, where is God in life's unfairness and 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 any 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 who we consider to be better-looking, or who have more money, or who live in a nicer home, or who have better luck, or a higher paying job, or any one of many other benefits and privileges which we by comparision 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 are able to suppress

a feeling of secret satisfaction? A few years ago I did a sermon on this subject with a German word as the title, SCHADENFREUDLICHKEIT, which according to one German scholar translates, "the enjoyable sin 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 and experience and enjoy everything that everyone else does.

The worst part of envy is that it is not merely

feeling bad because of someone else's gifts or good fortune when compared to ours, but it also causes us to devalue our own good gifts.

As I have said before, when I come across someone who is a better preacher than I, if I become envious, then 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 that would mean 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.

And there's an even more destructive facet to envy. Merely to feel bad because I do not have something that another person has is not the worst part of envy. The worst part is when the envious person wishes that the other did not have it, so that I might not suffer my imaginary disadvantage.Certainly Jesus knew that one of the most destructive temptation for human beings is to become envious. Jesus was schooled in the Old Testament and it has many stories of the destructive aspects of envy. 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 which Jesus told about the laborers in the vineyard.

The owner of a vineyard needed to have his grapes picked. So 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 the same place and hired more workers and told them he would pay a fair wage. At noon and at three o'clock in the afternoon he went and hired yet more workers. Then with only an hour remaining, he could see that all the grapes would not be picked, so he returned once more and hired still others who had not yet been able to get work for that 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 all of them, but as the work progressed, he discovered that if all the grapes were to be harvested, he would need more help.

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 at different hours during the day to see if there were still people who had not been hired by someone else. Since he knew they would need the money for the support of their families, he gave them a job.

We can assume that all those who were waiting to work in the marketplace wanted to work and needed the money. That's why they were there.

It was a common practice in those days for those who needed work to come to a central place to be available for those who needed to hire them for the day.

At the end of the day, the owner told his payroll clerk to pay each of the workers, but in reverse order--beginning with those who had been hired last and then on down to those who had been working the most hours. Remember Jesus said at another time, "The last shall be first and the first last."

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

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

The owner, hearing their complaints, reminded them that he had not defrauded them in any way. He paid them exactly what they had together agreed on 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 looking for work, worrying that they would not be able to earn enough to keep themselves and feed 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's 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 a number of things in life that aren't fair especially when we begin making comparisons. But why does it bother us, why are we envious when someone else is treated generously when at the same time we already have enough?

The workers in the story which Jesus told had 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 gifts?

So the first lesson this story teaches us is when we respond to life's unfairness with envy it's not a very helpful thing to do. 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 and with the other eye tries to keep track of whether others are receiving a little bit more soon becomes incapable of recognizing any blessings in this life at all. We become scorekeepers rather than those 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 this story about the workers in the vineyard. What we need to remember is that this story is not to give us advice on how to run our 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 is reminding us that God loves us equally in spite of life's unfairness. If you're a parent isn't that what you try to do with your children? We don't always do that as well as we should, but that's our goal.

This story as others which Jesus told, tells 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 and accept it.

It's a story which rejects "reward" religion. It rejects the heresy that God loves some people

more than others because they are more religious than the rest of us, or because they attend the "right" church or because they have earned God's love in some other 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 in spite of life's unfairness. We don't need to compare ourselves with 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 every- thing 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 better by far 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 is and whether or not we would be satisfied. A world with God's grace gives us more than we deserve. Amen.