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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Pentecost 17

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray... May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, in 1988, a revolutionary book came on the market.

Was it the book for the better diet? No.

Was it the book for how to expand our social circle, how to make friends and influence people? No.

Was it a book describing how to go about putting together one's bucket list? No.

Was it a book for picking the right college, or picking the right spouse, or picking the right place to live? No, no, and no.

No, the 1988 book about which I am talking is Robert Fulghum's book entitled, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.

Have you read this book? (Pause for hands to be raised.)

And the love tagline for the book, *Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things*.

Now, if you haven't read this book, I encourage you to do so.

It is a quick read. Not taxing at all.

But the book provides a good reminder about some basic truths for navigating life.

So here is some of the wisdom from the book:

1. Share everything.
2. Play fair.
3. Don't hit people.
4. Put things back where you found them.
5. CLEAN UP YOUR OWN MESS.
6. Don't take things that aren't yours.
7. Say you're SORRY when you HURT somebody.
8. Wash your hands before you eat.
9. Flush.
10. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

11. Live a balanced life - learn some and drink some and draw some and paint some and sing and dance and play and work everyday some.
12. Take a nap every afternoon.
13. When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
14. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.
15. Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.
16. And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK."

Now, I haven't gone back meticulously through Robert Fulghum's book recently, so I am not sure if one of life's most important truisms is in there or not, that being, "Remember, life's not fair."

Fulghum does admonish us to "Play fair," but I don't know if he says "life is not fair."

Like I said, I would have to peruse the book again more closely to see if that truth is in there.

I bring this up, though because in our gospel reading today, we have a parable that is like a lesson from *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.

We have a parable today, with which we are probably familiar.

It is "The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard."

And in this parable, Jesus tells a story about a landowner, who in the minds of his workers is not playing fair.

So indeed it seems the landowner, nor Jesus who is telling the story... Neither the landowner nor Jesus seemed to have ever read *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.

Fulghum had admonished his readers to "Play fair."

And yet, the landowner here is not playing fair.

And Jesus, by means of telling this story, is saying sometimes “God doesn’t play fair.”

PAUSE

So notice, in this story what the workers are upset about.

The workers feel they have gotten shirked in their pay.

The workers feel they have gotten ripped off.

That seems to be their complaint, is it not?

They have worked an entire day, and yet they have received the same pay as those who had worked only an hour.

Those who had worked the entire day figured they were entitled to more, deserving of greater pay, because of their longer hours of service.

But the landowner explains to them that they are getting what they contracted for when they came to work for the day.

They are receiving the usual daily wage as had been agreed.

But we can almost hear emerge from the lines of this text that proverbial phrase voiced since the beginning of time, say it with me: “It’s not fair.”

“It’s not fair. I should get more than those others who worked less hours.”

“It’s not fair. I deserve more pay.”

“It’s not fair. Why do they get the same when they didn’t work as hard?”

“It’s not fair.”

Yes, since the dawn of time, that phrase has been echoing throughout human history.

Think of the story of Cain and Abel.

Cain killed his brother Abel, and then Cain is given a mark of protection from God, a mark of protection, mind you, so that no one would kill Cain.

And, we can hear the grumbling, can’t we? “It’s not fair. Cain should be destroyed for what he did to his brother.”

And then there is the story of Jonah, where God changes God mind and does not bring about the destruction of the Ninevites, as God had planned, and which Jonah has prophesied.

And, we can hear Jonah's grumbling in that story, "It's not fair. Why should the Ninevites deserve a second chance?"

And, then in the New Testament, the early Jewish Christians were all up in arms about the Gentiles converting to Christianity, because Paul declares to the Jewish Christians that the Gentiles need not have to be circumcised first in order to convert.

And the Jewish Christians were upset saying, "It's not fair. Circumcision is the sign of the covenant with God, and now you, Paul, are saying it isn't necessary? It's not fair."

Of course, I would hope the Jewish Christians understood that they probably were going to lose a lot of Gentile converts if they pressed the issue of circumcision.

Can't you just see what those conversations would have been like with the Gentiles, "I have to do what to become a Christian? Are you mad?"

So, yes, that proverbial phrase has echoed throughout human history, "It's not fair."

PAUSE

And, Jesus, in today's Gospel text, once more demonstrates that God doesn't always "Play fair."

Yes, there are things that God does that really makes us scratch our heads.

But if we stop and think about it, when God isn't "playing fair," according to our standards, it usually means, I would dare say always means, that God's grace is at work.

PAUSE

Now, I do want to pause here a moment and say that the Auto Workers Strike that has been in the news is a completely different situation from what we are talking about here in the Gospel text.

The workers grumbling in the Gospel text is a completely different context than that of the workers grumbling and striking against the auto industry.

It is probably really hard for any of us to see where exactly God's grace is in the auto workers' strike.

And when speaking about God not playing fair, I am not suggesting that the bad things we experience in life are somehow orchestrated by God, that is not what I am saying at all.

So, I would be hesitant to say that this Gospel text today relates in any way specifically to what we see going on with the auto workers strike, nor with any difficult trial in life.

That just needed to be said.

And all the more, this parable in our gospel reading is actually meant to be understood as an allegory for God's kingdom.

Indeed how does the Gospel reading begin but with the words, "The Kingdom of heaven is like..."

This Gospel text is an allegory about the kingdom of heaven.

And with this in mind, we are to understand God the Father as the landowner, and the laborers in the vineyard as persons who have converted Christianity and now living out their lives in the Gospel, that is, "laboring in the vineyard."

But, what is interesting to note then, is that this parable was obviously addressing a concern in the early Church.

There must have been a concern among some Christians who had been converted for some time and who had been living out their lives in the Gospel for some time...

There must have been a concern in the early Church by those longer-converted Christians about those who had converted later in their lives, maybe even on their death beds.

Are those latecomers to Christianity going to get the same reward of eternity as those who have been faithful the majority of their lives?

And again, we can hear the grumbling, "It's not fair."

No, it isn't fair. And thank God it isn't fair. Again, this is about grace.

And God's grace isn't always fair, or equitable, or even-stein, or balanced, or even reasonable.

But as the text says, God's grace is generous, is charitable, is benevolent, is bountiful.

And we human beings unfortunately tend to begrudge others the goodness they experience in life.

And so the question begs to be asked, "Why do we do that? Why do we begrudge the good other people receive?"

Well, the Gospel text has an answer for that.

We begrudge others because we are envious, because we are jealous.

The landowner response to the those who complain about their wages, is this:

"Are you envious, are you jealous, because I am generous?"

Furthermore, notice also what the landowner says to those laborers who complain.

He says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

In other words, those who complain are often upset because they do not have "control" of the situation. When control rests in the hands of someone else or even several someones else, we tend to get bent out of shape.

And so, this text gets at the heart of why people often get in a rankle about situations.

One: We are jealous of others, what those others have and what we feel we are entitled to.

And two: We feel that we do not have control of, or any say in, a given situation.

And so, think about that for a moment.

Think for a moment about a time when you have been upset about a situation.

It may be a situation in which you are *presently* upset about.

It may be a situation in the *recent past* or even *further back in time*.

Yes, think about a time when you felt, “It isn’t fair.”

And in thinking about that situation, consider how you may have felt jealous of another AND think about how you experienced a lack of control in that situation, or that control was taken from you.

I guarantee those two emotions were part of your frustration...jealousy and a sense of not having control.

And then...and then think about how grace was or is working in that situation.

Because I promise you, as difficult it is to deal with situations where we say to ourselves, “It’s not fair...” As difficult as it is to deal with those situations, we must remember that God’s grace is also at work.

Unfortunately, we often get so caught up with the feeling of unfairness, that we forget to look for the grace, and even worse we allow ourselves to become cynical.

And so we need Gospel texts like the one today to remind us.

Grace is there. Grace may be hiding, but it is there. God is at work, I promise you.

And so, this is what I would add to Robert Fulghum’s book, if I had such power...

This is what I would add. After the place where it says, “Play fair...”

I would add, “And remember, sometimes it feels like God isn’t playing fair, or that life isn’t playing fair...”

“But remember to look at yourself—and consider, am I experiencing jealousy in this moment?, probably...”

“Am I experiencing feeling a lack of control at this moment?, probably...”

“But even so, God’s grace is there. God’s grace is all around us, so don’t, DON’T let the feeling of unfairness win out, or we will miss the powerful, astounding, and even surprising work of God’s grace.”

Like the Dick-and-Jane books say, “Look!” Look for grace, not the unfairness. Look for grace. And let grace be your focus.” Thanks be to God. AMEN.