

Time to Make a Difference—Part 3 “Time to Give Up the Illusion of Fairness”

We are in the third week of this sermon series—“Time to Make a Difference.” For those not here the past two weeks, it’s based on Paul’s letter to the Romans in which he proclaims loudly and clearly... “*Now* is the time. Not tomorrow... not years from now... *now* is the time. Salvation *is* at hand,” he says. “So don’t miss the boat! Right now, God is as close to us as our very breath, inviting us to participate not only in the transformation of our own lives, but in the transformation of the whole world.”

The time is now, according to Paul, for us to seek transformation. Your transformation. My transformation. This community’s transformation. The world’s transformation. Now is the time to live faith *fully* by seeking to transform old ways built on false hopes and broken promises into a new life built on the promises of God who invites us to be coworkers in the kingdom.

Now... is the time to make a difference! It’s what we’re called to do, Towson Presbyterian Church.

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But as we’ve also readily admitted, this transformation thing is anything but simple. This world is filled with so much inequity... so much need... so much injustice. It can be overwhelming to even pick a place to begin.

Still, last week, we did exactly that. Beginning with ourselves... and our unceasing need for the grace of God at work in our lives. Specifically, we explored a parable from Jesus conveying not only our own need to receive forgiveness... but also our need to *offer* grace... to extend forgiveness to those who’ve wronged us. For when we forgive, Jesus says, we not only release the other from our condemnation—freeing them—we also free ourselves from the burden of carrying a grudge and holding onto the pain from an old wound.

So *grace*—both receiving it and giving it—is where transformation often begins. After all, grace offers a kind of freedom that nothing else in this world can.

But as we see in another one of Jesus’ parables in our Gospel lesson this morning, the grace of God is bigger than mere forgiveness. In fact, the transformational grace by which Jesus calls us to live can be so radical... so revolutionary... it’s often downright offensive to those used to living according to this world’s ways.

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Jesus’ story begins with an assumed order of the day. Day laborers—able-bodied men who didn’t have a regular job—they would gather in the marketplace every morning in hopes of finding a job for that day. Most often, their work came from farmers who’d go out and hire however many workers they needed on hand for that day’s schedule. It was a simple but mutually beneficial relationship. The farmer and laborer would agree on a daily rate, and the laborer would work that one day for one’s day’s wages. Nothing more. Nothing less.

This means, of course, that the life of a day laborer was hard. Full of vulnerability and insecurity. There was never any certainty from one day to the next that tomorrow would bring

work or wages at all. So these men needed every single penny they could possibly earn. They weren't beggars, but they knew they weren't far from becoming one, either.

Perhaps this is why the benevolent landowner in the parable kept going back to the marketplace, looking for more laborers to hire? Perhaps the landowner understood what is so easy to overlook—these men *needed* work... they *needed* security. They *needed* the fulfillment to be found in the provisions of their earnings.

I hope we can see the amazing grace in the landowner's generosity, going out in search of people to hire hour after hour after hour.

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And yet, as those who live amid an egregiously capitalistic society... as those who've grown up in a culture that insists we're only worth what we make... well... surely we also see how unfairly the landowner's payment to the day laborers really was. I mean... how in the world is it fair that those who worked one hour get the same pay as those who worked all day long?

Truth is, it isn't fair! Not one bit. In fact, a better title for this story might be the Parable of the Unfair Landowner.

And Jesus is telling us that *this* is what the kingdom of heaven is like?

The kingdom of heaven is like a place where fairness doesn't matter?

The kingdom of heaven is like a world in which those who arrive last receive the same blessings as those who arrive first?

The kingdom of heaven is like a community in which there are no rankings at all—where it doesn't matter what grade you get, how hard you work, the degree behind your name, the amount in your savings account, the town in which you live, the car you drive, the company you keep? No categories at all? No differentiating folks based on merit of any kind? No rankings whatsoever? Just grace?

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It's as offensive to our notions of fairness as another one of Jesus' parables—the one about the Prodigal's Father and Brother. It's as if Jesus is doubling down on the proclamation that those who work hard... those who prove trustworthy... those who don't mess up and do what their told... well... Jesus says that God loves the good and faithful... but they don't curry even a little bit more favor... not even a smidgen more love from God than the screw ups and the dropouts and the tax collectors and sinners... those who show up late and do next to nothing.

It's offensive.

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It certainly offends the laborers who worked all day in Jesus' parable. Once they realize they didn't receive any more money than the fellas who worked just an hour, they rush up to the landowner complaining, "You made them equal to us! We worked harder and longer. We should get more than them. But you made them equal to us!"

Gosh... how many times do we feel so entitled that we get mad when others get what we already have? Like benefits, or legal status, or healthcare... "You made them equal to us!"

The landowner responds, “Are you serious? Tell me what you have to be upset about? Didn’t we agree on the usual daily wage? Did I not give you everything I promised you? So I want to give these last guys the same I gave to you? Why do you care? You’re not out one single penny. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

“Are you envious because I am generous?”

The landowner’s question cuts right to the heart of the matter. “Why are you envious because I am generous?”

Interesting point about that question, though. In the Greek, “Are you envious because I am generous,” literally translates, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” “Are you envious because I am generous?” “Is your eye evil because I am good?” In other words, “Why does your eye perceive it to be a problem that I’m doing good?” “Perhaps the problem, then, isn’t my goodness, but your perspective. Why do you perceive something good—like generosity—to be something bad?”

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But that’s the rub, isn’t it? We can’t help but look at the world around us through any eyes other than our own. Which means... we very naturally tend to look at the world through a self-centered perspective... constantly trying to make sure that we get what’s ours, and others get *only* get what’s theirs... as if there’s not enough for everyone to have enough.

It’s why Jesus doesn’t want us looking at the world from our own perspective, but through the lens of grace. It’s why he calls us to transform the way we not only look at our own blessings—taking stock of all with which we are blessed—but to also transform the way we see the needs and blessings of those around us. For Jesus knows the illusion of fairness is often what stands in the way of grace-filled justice.

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* Some of you may have seen this illustrated in a social media clip that made its way a little while ago.

It’s a picture of three kids of three very different heights trying to watch a parade... but only the tallest one of them could see over the crowd in front of them.

Fortunately, they brought three blocks they could stand on.

Now fairness would demand that each kid would get to stand on one of the three. That way, everyone gets the same amount—two blocks. That’d be fair.

But as it turns out, when they all stand on their one block, the tallest kid could still see, the middle kid could now see, but the shortest child could still not see. Now, according to the world, this is fair—all three kids have their one box. But according to grace, this isn’t justice—not when two can see but one still can’t.

In a realm of justice, the kids aren’t interested in making sure they each have the same amount of blocks. Rather, they want to make sure all three can see above the crowd. So the tallest kid doesn’t stand on his block, but gives it to the shortest kid. This way, the tallest kid can

see. The middle kid can see, standing on one box. And now the shortest kid can see, standing on two boxes.

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As Paul makes so clear in our first lesson this morning... this is the kind of community disciples are called to form and model to the rest of the world. It's what a transformed community looks like. A community that is more interested in pursuing an economy of grace than making sure each gets what they rightfully deserve. A community that is more interested in the common good than this world's motto of everyone for themselves. A community that is willing to break with expectations... a community that is willing to risk its own well-being amid the life-giving pursuit of justice... knowing that we're called not to seek our own well-being first, but the common good.

That's the way justice spreads. That's the way true peace is realized. Amid the community Paul knows is possible when we stop playing by this world's rules and start living into the way of grace.

It's not easy. And it's far from fair. Jesus is clear about that. But it *is* life-giving. It's incredibly, joyfully life-giving. Just imagine how those laborers felt when they were hired at four o'clock in the afternoon... and still given an entire day's wage. Imagine how transformed they were by the landowner's generosity? Imagine the difference it made in their life... and in the landowner's life to be so generous.

Imagine the difference our generosity can make when we let go of the illusions holding us back. Amen.