

What is fair?

And on receiving it (the denarius) they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” Matthew 20:11,12

We are a people very much concerned with what is fair. “That’s not fair!” is the shout across the school playground and it continues in later life across the union hall. The employee with 10 years sonority should get certain more privileges more than the one with only 5. We hear the cry concerning what is fair on the Food Bank floor also. Family of 5 #1 will diligently compare what was received by family of 5 #2 and if there’s even one small discrepancy we have the cry “What is fair here?”

Now equitable justice within the Kingdoms of this World should be pursued. We need take the cry seriously. But a problem arises when we begin to apply the ways of our earthly Kingdom to our Heavenly Kingdom. Concerning eternal rewards we’re very apt to want to issue the cry concerning what is fair. The long term worker of the 6th hour is very much put out when he sees that the mid-term worker of the 9th hour and the short-term worker of the 11th hour all line up for their denarius. We of the 6th hour believe that we have our case. We have our punch card stamped. We don’t stop to consider whether the guy of the 11th hour got more accomplished in the 11th hour than we did in a lifetime. Of course we think we know. We have a merit meter in our hip pocket. We think that we can judge. As self-appointed judges and dispensers of God’s mercy we cry out “That’s not fair”! Thinking that we’re worthy of much we say, “Give us what we deserve”.

But, as your mother might have said, “Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it”. How *apropos* it is here. For what we deserve according to the laws of the Kingdom of Heaven is outlined in the common confession on page 184 – Divine Service III. “I have

justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment. ...

And if you think, well, that’s just the old service, be assured that what we deserve is no less harshly written in the common confession we used this morning on page 151. **“We justly deserve your present and eternal punishment”**.

There isn’t a person present here today who can claim exemption from such confession. There isn’t any loophole in the liturgy that says *then may follow the confession*. For Scripture says “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”.

“Must we always have our sinfulness paraded before us?” asks the “fair minded self-righteous soul”? One well-known TV Evangelist, Joyce Meyer, reflecting on the common confession of sin is known to say and write, “I’m not poor. I’m not miserable. And I’m definitely not a sinner”. That’s what the world wants to hear and believe. And when you tell people what to hear it’s easy to become successful. But it isn’t faithful. It isn’t truthful.

The truth is that we are sinners. The truth is that we deserve temporal and eternal punishment.

We are in a lifelong battle against sin. We may have the New Nature or New Adam enter in at baptism but even a holy man such as St. Paul will tell you that the struggle against the Old just begins at that point. We are, as Luther coined it “Sinners and Saints”. And we must never forget that fact for therein is humility and hope. Although David was beloved and chosen of the Lord, he does not forget that He’s chosen not on merit but on God’s mercy. For we must learn to sing with David in Psalm 51:3 “For I acknowledge my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me”. Our sin and its accompanying punishment are ever before us. When this is our song the need for God’s mercy is ever before us. We are humble. We are thankful. We become a contented people.

If we share the last words Luther reportedly said on his deathbed: “We are beggars” then we can also share some other hopeful words of thankfulness and gratitude for the mysterious mercy of our God.

The world shares in the murmuring workers in the parable of the Vineyard, or the murmuring Israelites from the Old Testament Reading at the waters of Meribah despite having been fed manna for forty years in the wilderness. We have developed as a society and as individuals from the most wealthy and privileged to the lowest poverty stricken waif the most unattractive “sense of entitlement”. And those with that “sense of entitlement” who you see in action grumping in line at the welfare office, the passport office, or the tax man’s office, and regrettable mirrored in the preaching of the law, are to be pitied above all men. They are never happy.

But the saints who cultivate by God’s grace a true sense of who they are, sinners with “nothing in my hand I bring” sorts of attitudes can then behold the cross, the love and mercy of God with true wonder. It’s an eyes opened wide kind of wonderment. It’s the kind of wonderment I expect Paul had, an incredulous sense of wonderment even as he wrote it.

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

It’s the wonderment of the angels and the whole company of heaven who rejoice over the one sinner who comes to repentance. And I assure you, from eternities perspective, where any amount of human time, whether its 10, 20 or even 80 years, is but a drop in the bucket and then less, there is no greater or less rejoicing over the child brought into the faith seven days after birth than that joy shared over the thief on the cross.

God’s grace is what is to be celebrated. To God be the Glory!

There can be no boasting from the one who came into the race in the morning over the one who entered in at the last mile. There can be no boasting on our part if we truly believe the catechism’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed.

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

What is fair? Be careful about making that your cry in the Kingdom. Instead work in the Vineyard of God’s Kingdom. Run the race, as Paul says in the epistle reading. Look neither to the left nor to the right. Keep focused.

Yet rejoice. The work we do by God's grace means something. Outside the Kingdom there is only idleness. There is no true work – work that lasts or work that has meaning.

There are rewards. Scripture uses that term. In fact we are commanded to “lay up for yourselves **treasures** in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal”. In fact we are exhorted to follow Moses' example and all the saints who “considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the **treasures** of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11). We also hear of different rewards.

The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's **reward**, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's **reward**. (Matthew 10)

We cannot deny it. But wherever there are rewards they are still rewards given **by God's grace**.

But keep your eye on the greatest reward which is Christ Jesus.

I think of so many foot races that I've watched. The coaches, I'm sure tell the athletes not to do it I'm certain. But I've seen it even at the Olympic level. He's almost at the wire, but he glances over his shoulder to see where his competitor is. And in taking that little bit of energy to look back, he slows his pace. He slows it down just enough to see his competitor pass him by.

Keep your eye fixed on Jesus. Do not be concerned over whether the latecomer receives a reward equal to your own or not. Stop being so overtly concerned over what is “fair” at least “fair” in your own eyes. We might not be able to trust our earthly landowners but we can trust God who says to his workers “Come and work, and I'll give you what is right”. Trust in that.

And if you've forgotten why, behold the cross upon which the King of Glory died. Behold the blood that flows down. Behold his cry of forgiveness and mercy to all. Behold his love. And you will know that indeed, you shall not be disappointed.

We shall soon leave this place. And out on the school grounds and in the workplace and the marketplace we will hear the cry “What is fair?” But Christians remember that we are citizens of another Kingdom – the Kingdom of Heaven. Here our cry must not be “What is fair? Or Give us what I deserve!” for what we deserve is death. Instead our cry must be what we sing each Sunday in the Kyrie “Lord have mercy”. And that cry is heard by a compassionate God. It is the cry for mercy that bestows blessings beyond what we deserve. May we rejoice in His mercy today.

Amen.