

Septuagesima, 2006

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

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XGrace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ X

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is a kingdom, not very far away, where everything is fair and just. Everyone gets exactly what is due to him, no more and no less. The common sense rule of first come, first served is always followed. The Prince of this kingdom is, in fact, zealous for justice and is eager to make sure that there is perfect equity – for every action an equal and opposite reaction. What is owed is always paid in full, to the last cent. The gate and the way to this kingdom is wide – it's easy to get there if that's where you want to be.

Have you not felt the desire to live in this Kingdom of Fairness? Have you never cried out, "That just isn't fair!"? Surely you have. Most of all when you have been wronged. You have delighted in thoughts of how you would exact full payment from someone who has wronged you. That family member who betrayed you – you know the sweet taste of self-righteous thoughts about what you'd like to do to them. That fellow who cheated you in business – how you would enjoy giving him what he has coming. That person who looks down on you and is always so snide and mean-spirited – what a tongue lashing you'd like to give them. Yes, a Kingdom of Fairness – where the first are first and the last are last and everyone gets what they have coming – is this not what mankind has always desired?

Repent – and right quickly. For this is the sign that hangs on the gate of this Kingdom of Fairness: Abandon all Hope Ye Who Enter Here. For this Kingdom of Fairness is none other than the Kingdom of Hell, ruled by it's Prince, that ancient serpent, the Devil who is eager to see you get just what you deserve. For stop for a moment and think about fairness. You call for it when you are wronged, but what about when you are the one has done the wronging? What about your cruel words to family and friends? What about your betrayals? What about your corner cutting in business and less that strictly honest contracts and deals? What do you seek when you are caught in your sins both great and small? Would you like all your neighbors to be able to exact

their daydreams of righteous vengeance against you? Would you like all you have coming?

Most of all though, do you want what is fair from God? For our God and Lord Jesus Christ â€ did he not say in Matthew 5 that he who calls his brother "fool!" is liable to the fires of hell? Did he not say in that same chapter that she who even looks at another man lustfully has committed adultery with him in her heart? What wage have you earned from your Lord and God? St. Paul knows the answer: "The wages of sin is death," he says, and "all have sinned and fallen short of his glory."

So repent. Turn away from this desire for fairness and from your sins and instead cast your cares on this Jesus. For listen â€ he tells of another Kingdom. Not the Kingdom of Hell, but the Kingdom of Heaven. He says it is nothing like that Kingdom of Fairness â€ for the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who pays a man who worked for hour a whole day's wage! This isn't fair at all! It's crazy. You can't run a business that way, it'd be broke in a week. But what a glorious madness this is! It's the gracious foolishness of God which is wiser than man's wisdom. It's a Kingdom of Grace where no one gets what he deserves. Where the last are first and the first is last and still no one is jealous for no one has the right to be: all are getting better than what they earned, more than they could have hoped.

So rejoice to think back on the truth of what your mother told you long ago: Life isn't fair. She spoke truer words than she knew, for that statement is true in a way better than she meant it. Life indeed is not fair â€ for God will recompense you not with what you have earned, but with what another has earned in your place.

For do you not know that it is written that "God made him who knew no sin to become sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God"? Have you not heard the Apostle declare the mystery that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us- for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."? Yes, the Kingdom of God is founded on a most unfair and gracious act: our Lord Jesus Christ taking on the curse that sin brought. He did not earn that. He did not deserve it. For behold the First has become Last.

Behold on the cross the great travesty of justice and the great miracle of mercy. For the First born, the only-begotten Son of God hangs there having become for you the very last and worst sinner, becoming accursed for your sake. Such is the mercy of God the Father that the curse you were under was taken by another. Such is the graciousness of God that your eternal death

is averted by the death of the Eternal One in human vesture.

Oh, Christian rejoice! For all this grace is yours. Eternal life isn't fair! You didn't earn it, but it's yours. For you were baptized into the death of Christ and were thus raised with him to newness of life. Your life is now hid with God in Christ " he is your life. The great and merciful Lord who throws around the wage he earned for you on the cross loves you and will never let you go. So give up on being fair and instead learn to love the grace of God.

For the path to that dark Kingdom of Fairness is wide and tempting. Seeking vengeance and your fair share and full equality tastes so sweet in the mouth. But it is a bitter pill that will turn your stomach. For fairness leads only to the death of the sinner " but grace and mercy leads to life. So heed St. Paul this morning when he says to run well your race. Stay in this course of grace upon grace and turn your back on the dark ways of fairness. And note well how St. Paul says to stay in this course. For he speaks of Moses and how he was baptized in the Red Sea and ate spiritual food.

As all things in the Old Testament, this was a shadow of things to come. The substance of this shadow you now have. For St. Paul says that these things were shadows of Christ and that through these shadows the people of God of old had access to the forgiveness and grace of Christ. How much more blessed, dear Christian, are you! For the substance of Christ is yours.

Moses had to be content with manna and the lamb of Passover. But St. Paul says that "Christ is our Passover and has been sacrificed." This only true Passover Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world has given you the greatest of all gifts: himself. So know that your true spiritual food is the very body and blood of Christ, born of Mary. Seek this saving food, this medicine of immortality often. For who can claim that they do not need it? Who can say that he is so strong in the faith that he is not tempted to follow the wide path that leads to the Kingdom of Fairness, the Kingdom of Sin and Hell?

Consider what Luther's Small Catechism says, "What should admonish and encourage a Christian to receive the Sacrament frequently? First, both the command and the promise of Christ the Lord. Second, his own pressing need, because of which the command, encouragement, and promise are given." We have a great need " salvation from sin and temptation to fall away from the faith; and we have a great promise " that Christ our Lord comes to us personally in his very body and blood to give us life and salvation.

So be hungry for this Supper of the Lord which is the Supper of Grace. For by the miracle of his Word the very fruits of the sacrificial tree of the cross are present: the Lord Jesus Christ's true body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your spiritual life. This is the gift and strength you need to cling to your Lord. For in the Supper of your Lord you have communion and union with the one who is the gracious King of the Kingdom of Heaven. He, the First, became Last for your sake that you might be first in the Kingdom of Grace. Hasten back next week to this altar to receive him.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

X

Pr. H. R. Curtis

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"But with a man who belongs to an everlasting kingdom all is well and it is fitting that he should dance through life forevermore."

- Martin Luther

(1544)