

# Worship Service Resources “Unfair”

Pentecost 17, Sunday,

24<sup>th</sup> September 2023

Philippians 1:21-30 NIV / Matthew 20:1-16 NRSVUE

## Prelude

Opening Music [He Lives](#)

performed by Alfred Street Baptist Church

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## Welcome/Announcements

### Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn *Brethren, We Have Met to Worship* 8

### Call to Worship (responsive)

One: Praise the Lord! Praise the name of the Lord!

**All: Praise the Lord! Give thanks to him!**

One: God has blessed us and brought us to this time.

**All: God has blessed us and brought us to this place.**

One: God has caused his name to dwell in our midst.

**All: God has stirred our hearts and made us glad.**

One: God has shown us his glory in his mighty word.

**All: God has shown us the way of truth and life.**

One: Praise the Lord! Praise the name of the Lord! Praise the Lord! Give thanks to him!  
For 75 years, God has nurtured and fed us.

**All: For 75 years, God has shown us his grace. For 75 years, God has given himself  
in Word and Sacrament.**

One: For 75 years, God has empowered us with his Holy Spirit.

**All: For 75 years, God has made us his witnesses in the world.**

One: For 75 years, God has placed us in loving fellowship with one another.

**All: Praise the Lord for 75 years! Praise him for 75 more!**

One: Praise the Lord for evermore! Oh, praise the name of the Lord!

## Invocation

Liberating God, we seek your journey. With parted waters, set us free. With cloud and fire, guide us. With gushing waters, quench our thirst. With food from heaven, feed us. Draw us out with joy and singing, that we might know your ways. Amen.

**In our epistle reading this morning from Philippians, Paul talks about what Christian life means to him, and he urges his followers to stand fast in living the Gospel in their lives. As we listen to these words to the church in Philippi, let's think about what living out our faith looks like, not only to ourselves but to others.**

## Epistle Reading      **Philippians 1:21-30 NIV**

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!

I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that

through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me. Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that

you stand firm in the one Spirit,<sup>[a]</sup> striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

## A Time of Prayer

### Joys and Concerns

### Pastoral Prayer

Generous God, so often we see others as more fortunate than ourselves, as getting more for what they do, as more beloved.

Teach us in your time, O God, how your love is much more than just fair.

Teach us how it is a special caring for each and every one of us, tailored just for our own size and shape, no matter what riches others may have, or how many prizes, or how full of fame.

O God, your love comes first and is so much better than all that and completely unearned. We thank you for that, we thank you for providing for us, we thank you for calling us to labour in your vineyard, we thank you for the bread from heaven that feeds us today and for the promise of how you will spread your table for us in the promised land and forever provide bread without price and wine without cost...

Thank you, gracious God, for always giving us much, much more than we can earn or ever deserve. Contrasted with our often calculated way of doing business with one another, your love towards us seems reckless, extravagant, and unbelievable gracious. Forgive us when we consider all of this our right rather than as your gift.... Forgive us too for when we have resented the love you show towards others who have not served you as long as us—for when we have been angry because you have brought joy to others whom we think greater sinners than we—for when we have measured our worth rather than rejoiced in your mercy.

Creator God, you call us to work in your vineyard—to reach out to others in your name and bring your healing word, your gentle touch, your embracing love to them. Help us to be good workers—ones that seek the lost in the market places and village squares; ones who are unafraid to see in a stranger the image of Christ, and in a sinner a brother or sister for whom he died and rose again.

Empower us as individuals and as a church to be the kind of ambassadors who know and do your will, so that in meeting us people meet you...

Almighty God, hear our prayers for our family and our friends, for our church, our community, and our world.

All these things we pray in the name of Christ Jesus, the joy of heaven to earth come down; he who is our life and our hope, our daily bread, and our rock and our refuge. Amen.

**Hymn      *Come, Thou Fount*      521**

**Our gospel lesson this morning is another parable from Jesus. In this parable, we are given a lesson on what is just and fair, from God's perspective. As we listen to these words from Matthew let's reflect on how we judge what is fair and what isn't, and if that's really our call to make.**

**Gospel Lesson      Matthew 20:1-16 NRSVUE**

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.

When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.

And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?'

They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius.

And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,

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.'

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?'

Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

## **Message - *Unfair***

It's funny for a country that so identifies with Western culture and values, when it comes to our conception of fairness, we really cling to a rather Eastern notion, that of Karma. Popular in Eastern religions, to put it in simple terms, if someone does something bad, something bad will happen to them. It's a concept I think it's safe to say many of us have really latched onto, isn't it? In fact, we almost wish it on people. Of course, we put our own Christian spin on it. Instead of saying "Karma will get them" we'll often say something like, "we all face the same judgment" or "we'll all be giving an account before God someday." But is that how our scripture today tells us God works? Does the Almighty have the same standards when it comes to fairness? Well, God's sense of justice doesn't jive with what most of us would consider to be "fair." It's not the way we think; it's not the way we have organized the world. It often blows apart everything we think we know and believe about the economics

of life. We think everything has a price, or should. We instinctively keep a tally of what we owe and what is owed us. Usually the latter is much higher than the former. This tally makes up a huge amount of our identity, an identity that the Divine's standard for forgiveness shows to be totally false. Because that's a lot of what this parable is about, under the surface. It's about showing that God has a whole different set of values than those we work with in this world. Our system makes clear what we value, by keeping those tallies, by assigning worth, equating everything with a value.

There's a story about a young college graduate who was interviewing for their first job in their new career. Reaching the end of the job interview, the Human Resources Person asked the young accountant, "What starting salary were you thinking about?" The Accountant said, "In the neighborhood of 100,000 a year, depending on the benefits package." The interviewer said, "Well, what would you say to a package of 5 weeks vacation, full medical and dental, Company Retirement Fund to 50% of salary, Executive Share Option Scheme, Profit Related Pay and a company car leased every 2 years - say, a new BMW?" The Accountant sat up straight and said, "Wow! Are you kidding?" The interviewer replied, "Yes, but you started it." That's kind of the problem we have when we are trying to compare our sense of fairness and justice with God's kin-dom standards, it's comparing apples to oranges. The first will be last and the last will be first is not karma, but rather that everyone gets what they need—not what they think they deserve.

Such a parable as this should be a clear signal that Jesus is presenting a very different world-view than the achievement contest we all like to play in our Western, monetary valued culture. But that's the reason Jesus used a parable to teach us this lesson. Parables are always trying to subvert business as usual using paradox and contradiction to undo our reliance on what we think is logic. In effect, it's telling us a story that defines normal to be the complete opposite of what we've been taught normal is. Yet we often do not let parables do that for us. Our dominant way of thinking is so in control that we try to figure them out inside of our existing consciousness, make them fit into what's the norm in our culture, and if we can't do that, we just ignore them or consider them out of date.

But Jesus is making the point here as he so frequently does, that the kin-dom life we are to be living into now in our Christian community, is quite different from what our worldly culture dictates. It's not how much we get that matters, it's that we get enough that matters. It's not that he or she got paid the same for less work, it's that you all got paid enough to meet your needs. To paraphrase Einstein, who once said that "No problem can be solved by the same way of thinking that caused it in the first place."

Parables aim to subvert our old consciousness and offer us a way through by utterly re-framing our worldview. Too often the biblical text is not a transformative document and does not bring about a "new creation," because we pull it inside of our own comfortable systems, what we call "common sense." The questions this text generates have led Christian commentators throughout the years to try to find some other acceptable explanation for the vineyard owner's treatment of these late-coming laborers. Some have suggested that

he pays them so generously out of his own compassion for their need—not a bad explanation, I suppose. Others have thought he was rewarding their willingness to respond to his call with confidence and faith. Others have speculated that the workers were actually doing him a great favor, because the harvest was very urgent, he needed their help, and he was grateful they were willing to step in at the very last minute. But once we find ways to rationalize the paradox of a parable, once we make it fit our criteria, no divine breakthrough is possible.

Frankly speaking, if we make Scripture fit our worldview, then, we make it possible for it to become largely harmless and forgettable. How much do we really let scripture transform us? Can we get past our own sense of what's fair, what's forgivable and forgettable? Or are we stuck in the ruts of our own sense of justice we were brought up in? It's certainly not easy to change how we've thought, or more accurately, been trained and conditioned to think, for our whole lives. It's difficult to completely change what we value, those norms of what achievement, success, & fairness mean. But yet that's what we're called to do.

Paul tells us in Philippians that we are to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. I would imagine that would probably include living lives in accordance with the values he presents. If God can extend the same grace and forgiveness to the one who comes in the last hour as the one who has been there all along, why can't we? As long as we have the necessary grace extended to us, can we, or better yet, should we, begrudge others the same opportunity? And why does it matter to us?

This is how discord spreads throughout the community. This sense of being wronged, of not being treated justly or fairly. As long as we compare ourselves to others, as long as we have the need to “keep up with the Jones's,” we will never be satisfied, and we will open the door to resentment, to jealousy, to bitterness. This is the heart of much of what Christ preached and taught.

Don't be attached to the world, to stuff, to buildings, to placing value on earthly riches and the honor system it promotes. Not because Jesus had a deep attachment to socialism, but because he knows the discord and tension that wealth-based value systems lead to. It's as old as scripture itself. Do not covet what your neighbor has. We see it in the news every day. This group or that group does not perceive themselves as being valued the same as they used to be. They aren't being treated “fairly” or “justly” because they perceive they are somehow being valued less. Yet so often, they are the very ones who have the history of the most privilege, and see losing that privilege as not being fair. Which certainly differs from the very real discrimination that still exists. That has become abundantly clear over and over again. But if your criteria is like our story, that you are getting the same pay for a day as everybody else but you are working a full day when others aren't, then that's the kind of last being first and first being last that Jesus is talking about. You are both getting what you need, that's the only justice to be considered. It's not a lesson meant to be something we find comfortable.

Like most parables, it's something we will have to wrestle with. And we've obviously been doing that as Western culture, considering two millennia later, I'm still preaching on this text about the cultural values that obviously haven't changed much over that time either. But it's something to think about when you see folks protesting the loss of their "culture, their way of life." If it's based on what the world considers fair and just, is that such a bad thing?

Think about this parable when you wish "Karma" on somebody. Is that how God really rolls? Think about this parable when you start to feel resentment, or jealousy towards another because of their tally being bigger than yours. Because all those negative feelings are what this lesson is trying to prevent. In telling this parable of the laborers in the vineyard – the ones who worked different amounts for the same pay – Jesus wants us to know that God would have us concentrate on our own spiritual condition, not spending time and energy considering the value of what everyone else has, and to accept our ultimate worth and our ultimate purpose without comparing our contributions to those of others.

Today we have heard Jesus turn one of our normal, worldly views upside down. In so doing, according to our faith, he actually places those values right-side up. Today's parable teaches that life is from God's point of view, not a matter of human fairness or unfairness. It is not a matter of deserving or undeserving. Through today's parable, Jesus reminds us that whatever we have is, after all, a gift from God. Whatever we have is more than we could ever earn. God is overwhelmingly generous.

It is enough that we have the profound privilege of laboring and serving in God's vineyard. It all boils down to what we value. Does it match what God values, what is important in the kin-dom that Jesus speaks of? I pray we seek that same understanding, that we express gratitude for the grace we've been given, and extend our own grace to others, without judging their worth, because none of us have earned the wage of grace we receive. Amen.

## **Call to Serve**

**As we listen to this interlude, played by Annie, let's give some thought as to how we model and promote God's fairness and grace in our own lives, and how we as individuals, and as a community can extend that fairness and grace to others, wherever we may be.**

## **A Time for Reflection**

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving (responsive)**

One: The Lord God has blessed us with 75 years of mission and ministry in this place as Olympic View Community Church. We are a remembering people, and it is good that we remember that God has chosen us, baptized us, and brought us together as the Church in this place. As remembering people, we look back at all the saving acts of God: the Creation, the Flood, the Covenant, the Exodus, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Church.

We are a remembering people, but we are also a people of this day, brought together by God to be a holy fellowship of believers: the Body of Christ, sharing, caring, working in the world, and living in the hope of the world to come.

Our eyes look back with thanksgiving. Our eyes look forward in hope. Therefore, with thanksgiving for the past and hope for the future, let us dedicate ourselves and our lives to the mission which God gives us as the Church of Jesus Christ in this place.

**All: Almighty God, we give you thanks for the work you have done in this place. We give you thanks for your love and faithfulness. When we called on your name, you made your presence known to us. When we prayed, you heard us. When we preached your Word and administered your Sacraments, you were in our midst. You have accepted our humble sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. You have listened to our confessions and forgiven our sins. And you have sent your Holy Spirit to heal and comfort our hurts, our sorrows, our infirmities, and our losses.**

One: Continue to empower us with your Spirit, O Lord, that we might proclaim your Gospel to all people.

**All: We dedicate our lives to your service.**

One: Help us to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ in all that we do and say.

**All: We dedicate our lives to your service.**

One: Show us how we might give care and support to the needy, love and mercy to the broken and forlorn.

**All: We dedicate our lives to your service.**

One: Show us new ways of loving one another and those around us.

**All: We dedicate our lives to your service.**

One: Blessed Lord, draw our hearts to you, guide our minds, fill our imaginations, control our wills and make us wholly yours. Use us as you will, to the glory of your holy name and the welfare of your people; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**All: Amen**

**Hymn                      *For Christ and the Church*                      416**

## **Benediction**

Go out from here as workers in God's upside-down kingdom, where the last are first and the first are last, where needs are met in miraculous ways, and there is grace enough for all! And may the blessing of God, the love of Jesus Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit surround you and sustain you in the coming days. **Amen.**

## **Postlude**