

"It's Not Fair!"
Matthew 20:1-16

Equal pay for equal work! Equality for all! "**All men are created equal**" is arguably the best-known phrase in any of America's political documents. We like to treat people fairly. We also expect to be treated fairly. So when we read the story from Matthew 20 today which Jesus told as a parable, it is easier for us to identify with the workers in the vineyard who felt cheated because they worked all day and got the same wage as those who only worked a part of the day. From the point of view of work and wages, this parable is about a gross injustice. Was Jesus recommending a crude form of communism? Or was he suggesting that we be ruthless exploiters taking advantage of the workers?

Don: I think I know the solution to this problem. All these men needed to do was to organize themselves and other workers into a union. This way no one gets cheated out of their wage. No landowner could take advantage of them. They would actually have more bargaining power!

Paul: I can just see us organizing a group of men to help with this issue. We could have had them learn something about fairness and equal pay for equal work. I think this parable can really be a great take off for some protests. We even prepared some signs to go with it and here is a dry run of what might help people really get this parable (have men cheering: Jobs with justice and carrying their signs).

Roula: Well, it is certainly very important for us to help protect the most vulnerable and the workers. Yet, I think there is more justice to the story than siding with the laborers who worked all day. Whenever we read a parable from the Gospels we need to look deeper for its real message. The Kingdom of God as presented by Jesus here in Matthew is about a graceful kind of justice that looks at the root causes of injustice. The workers who got to work late were waiting all day to be hired, but were not picked up till later. Their efforts were the same as the other ones. Yet, they could not do anything about their unemployment situation. Being paid the same was to send them home to their families able to survive. They lived in the wilderness of unemployment. The landowner who acts in surprising ways reminds us that God's generosity does not follow human reasoning. This was especially shocking to the early hearers of this story because a landowner would have been seen by the people as the exact opposite of the kingdom of God. It would be to us like saying, "The kingdom of God is like a corrupt CEO!" So, this image of a generous landowner makes it hard to believe for those people who heard Jesus and who were most likely poor peasants themselves. Landowners owned great estates which, when farmed, provided the economic backbone of the nation. Farmers didn't own the farms they worked; rather, they worked the land of landowners under contract to those landowners. Most landowners required 50% of the crop the farmers planted and harvested on their land as payment for the use of that land. Out of the remaining 50%, the typical peasant farmer had to pay half in government taxes and 20% of that in Temple tithes. It was only the remainder (15% of the original 100% crop) that the farmer got to keep, and out of that he would have to take all operating costs of his farm, seed and fertilizer for the next year, pay village taxes and support his family. The result was that peasants hated landowners, and saw them as oppressive. In addition to being a landowner, the land was a vineyard. These were the most hated because vineyards produced, not a staple of the economy (wheat, barley, rye) but a luxury item (wine) sold to the wealthy. Further, the care of a vineyard did not require a small number of farmers who would work that land for many years and who would develop a continuing relationship with the owner, but an army of expendables who could be hired by the day, worked hard and thus exploited by the owner. These tended to be workers who could not afford a regular kind of farm because of being forced off their farm because of debt, natural disaster, or foreclosures.

With this in mind, how can we expect generosity out of the landowner? We would expect the landowner to pay the workers only for the hours they worked. Jesus' listeners are stunned, speechless with what they are hearing. The other surprise in the parables is that the workers who worked all day felt cheated because they worked longer hours but only got the same wage as the others. Caught in a similar situation, this would be our response as well. "This is not fair!" But why would they complain? They were paid what they were promised? Garrison Keilor, in commentary on this text, warns preachers to avoid a text that suggests that you could, get in on the last portion of the service or sermon and still reap the full benefits.

The assumption of these workers and of most people is that life ought to be fair and that all people should be treated similarly. But God is not about some kind of cookie-cutter fairness. We often hear, "You've got to pull yourself up by your bootstraps," or "you've got to work hard if you want to get ahead." While there is some truth to these sayings, they are not always true in every situation. We all don't come to life with the same privileges and backgrounds. Our life circumstances also change and make some of us more vulnerable than others: divorce, illness, death, disability, layoffs, housing market problems, bad economy, accidents, and so on.

Jesus was teaching about the kingdom of God and it's kind of justice which takes into account all of life and not just our views about who deserves what and when. Robert Linthicum, a specialist in urban transformation talks about this parable teaching us that "the kingdom of heaven is built upon justice-centered grace – upon what one is given by God – and therefore upon generosity. The kingdom comes to us as gift, and so must we be gift to each other. Rather than being possessed by the drive to get for ourselves everything that we believe should come to us, we should be motivated by how to work for a society that will protect the most vulnerable and will combine justice with mercy. Rather than being fixated upon what each of us is able to get, a truly just society is centered on how to guarantee that the most vulnerable are equitably protected – even at sacrifice to me. And the focus is on giving, not getting! In other words, when a society or an economic order is "fair" and is thus built around getting, of acquiring what is "legitimately mine", that society will inevitably and eventually become greedy, exploitive, oppressive, controlling and dominating. When, on the other hand, a society is based upon justice-filled grace in which the perception is that all of life is a gift and our only concern is to be sure that that gift is equitably distributed, then that society will tend to be generous, relational, just and equitable."

The lesson of the parable here is one of extraordinary generosity. Everyone got a day's wage. Everyone could go home and feed his or her family. If we are to live according to God's grace knowing that all that we have is a gift, even our own breath, then we would strive for communities that protect all and give to all. Instead of being focused on ourselves and what we are getting, we can learn that truly the greatest gift of life is learning how to share. Pastor William Sloan Coffin once wrote, "There is no smaller package in the world than that of a person all wrapped up in himself." The happiest people in the world are those who really know how to give. Our spiritual freedom is closely connected to how we go about life. If we are always struggling to get more or to keep all, we tend to close ourselves any spiritual growth.

This is especially important during these difficult economic times. As we see our American dream of unlimited wealth and strong economy coming into question, we have a choice to make. Do we panic and try to hog whatever we can for ourselves, or do we respond as communities working together for the common good? Johnny Carson tells a story about the time when, as the host of the Tonight Show, he made a joke about there being a toilet paper shortage in the city. The next day there really was a shortage because all the viewers who had watched his show ran out afterward and bought up extra toilet paper just in case. There was no

trust in the fact that people, if they chose to work together, could ration out the toilet paper to make sure there would be enough for everyone. People panicked and grabbed not what they needed, but more than they needed, leaving others with nothing at all. We always have this choice between trusting that there is enough for all or only enough for me.

There is an old rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm and when the father died, they had found their working together so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. So each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had corporately produced. Across the years the elder brother never married, stayed an old bachelor. The younger brother did marry and had eight wonderful children. Some years later when they were having a bad harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of his harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he is already asleep, I'll take some of what I have put in my barn and I'll slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children. At the very time he was thinking down that line, the younger brother was thinking to himself, "God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn't been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He's much too fair. He'll never renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over into his barn." And so one night when the moon was full, as you may have already anticipated, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God weeping for joy because two of God's children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy and because we are made in God's image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well. Life may not always be fair, but it is always rooted in God's grace. Amen.