

Lection: Matthew 20:1-16

Recently a friend who supports my sermon writing habit sent me a list of one liners. Some of them were humorous, some of them were common sense, some of them were outrageous and a few of them were absolutely irresistible. The list included such gems as: "Always read stuff that will make you look good if you die in the middle of it"; "If you can't be kind, at least have the decency to be vague"; "It may be that your sole purpose in life is simply to serve as a warning to others"; "When everything's coming your way, you're in the wrong lane"; "Birthdays are good for you. The more you have, the longer you live"; "Never buy a car you can't push"; and "Never put both feet in your mouth at the same time, because then you won't have a leg to stand on." Those were all pretty good, but the very best of the bunch, as far as I'm concerned, as a former resident of New York City, was the one which stated: "Accept that some days you're the pigeon, and some days you're the statue." I found that one almost good enough to commit to needlepoint and hang on the wall, because it does seem to define a good portion of the human dilemma and especially the topic I want to consider with you today. I want to think with you about fairness.

What is fair? How do we define it? How do you know when you are being fair or when someone is treating you fairly? And for the person of faith, is there a difference between fair and faithful?

Two comments from friends, two vivid memories, and one troubling Bible story raised this issue for me a couple of weeks ago. We were talking and a friend casually mentioned: "life is not fair." They were commenting on something in the news, perhaps one of those hard luck situations we have all seen or experienced; or maybe some tragedy major or minor that involved the innocent in undeserved suffering. Life is not fair, they said, the good sometimes die young, the virtuous are not always rewarded, and evil seem to prosper. And then later that same day someone in our building in Tacoma mentioned that during the housing bubble some years ago, they became on paper a millionaire, but that when the bubble popped, it was a very different story. And somehow, that just didn't seem to be fair.

And those two comments brought back two memories. A number of years ago, on Long Island, I was at a public hearing on a new housing development planned in the community where I lived. The developer stood up and said that if he succeeded with his new development, everyone in that community would benefit from higher housing prices. And he was right, he built his mammoth houses, he constructed his 5,000 square foot "McMansions" and the housing prices in that historic area soared. Everyone who owned a house became wealthy on paper at least. A couple of years later, I saw that builder and reminded him of what he had said at that meeting. I told him he was right, everything he had said was true, except for one thing. I told him that he was like the Pied Piper; that he made that town a whole lot wealthier, but that he took away our children, because virtually, none of the children who grew up in that community could afford to live there anymore and somehow, that just didn't seem to be fair.

The other memory is one I'm sure many of you share. It's the memory of groups of people waiting to be hired as day laborers. I've seen it on St. Thomas in the Caribbean, and in some cities I've visited in Africa and Mexico and it probably happens somewhere here in Colorado too. Men and women who want to work, day laborers, standing on street corners or in a park, waiting for a contractor to offer them a job. Waiting to pick vegetables, or shovel dirt, or pass roofing tiles. Willing to work and hoping for a job. Some of them get work and some of them don't. Some of them feed their families, and some of them don't. And somehow, that doesn't seem fair.

And finally, the Bible story that Jesus told us this morning. It's a tough one: the story of the landowner who went out to hire laborers for his vineyard. On the surface this is a story about fairness and it's not fair. The day laborers are hired at different times. Some of them work the entire day, some of them work for just a few hours in the heat of the day and at the end of the day, they are not treated fairly. They are all paid the same wage for different amounts of work and the ones who have worked the whole day protest that the landowner is not fair. And the landowner says look, I don't care about fairness, it's my farm and my money and I can do as I wish, get over it. And then he asks the grumbling workers: "Are you envious because I am generous?" Every one of them who went into the field, early or late was paid the same wage. Every one of them received the money necessary to make it through another day. Every one of them was able to feed their family. Was that landowner being fair? Or was that landowner dabbling in something way beyond fair?

Now at this point, I have to tell you that I struggled for several hours trying to think about what to say next. But then I went back and looked at the story again and noticed something. This story is a parable and not a news report and so the facts are not nearly as important as the meaning behind the facts. The story begins with those little words: “The Kingdom of God is like,” the reign of God is like this.....—which should have been a tip off to me and to you that we are not dealing here with how the world works—or with any concept of fairness we might be able to understand—like how when we were kids Mom divided up the chocolate cake so that your piece was exactly the same size as your brothers. That’s how moms are supposed to do it and that’s what you and I expect.

But this is a story about what the reign of God will be like, how the “kingdom of God” will unfold. This is a story about how the world might work and about how life might become if and when we choose to live it by the light of God’s love. This is a story about how God as you understand God or how the God spark in you and me might be operating.

And then it dawned on me. I can’t think of a single fair thing—as I learned about fairness as a kid, or as an adult or as we might think about it in terms of politics or business or our day-to-day lives—I can’t think of anything fair in the entire sweep of biblical history. Fairness is just not a biblical idea.

Let me tell you what I mean. If it were simply a matter of fairness, every one of us would always get exactly what we deserved every day of the week and then big time at the end of the line. If God were running the universe like a chartered accountant and keeping tabs on our actions and our attitudes like some sort of heavenly bookkeeper, then most of us would be a far piece up the wrong creek. Fair is what I expect from my banker, thank God, I don’t receive fairness from God.

How does the Psalmist say it? “God is merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”? (Ps. 103:8) Now, it is just possible, since I don’t know most of you, that there is a perfect person present here today. It is just possible that there’s someone here today who has never said or done something that they hope to heaven no one ever finds out about. It is possible that there is someone here today who hasn’t messed up big time or small time and who carries absolutely no regrets about anything. That’s possible, I suppose, but I doubt it.

God is not fair. God is gracious and operates with grace. It is God who is the landowner in the story of the workers in the field. It is God who gives to each one of those workers the means to live and to survive another day. It is God who gives me and you the next breath and who does not judge us based on our actions or our attitudes or our foibles or our imperfections. God begins from the place of grace, accepting us and renewing us and giving us the chance to be gracious and caring for one another.

And Jesus lays out the story of the workers in the vineyard to invite us to treat one another and this world with the same sort of grace. In my mind, this story says something about hungry children. It has something to say about the children who have never seen a dentist or the thousands of families right in our back yard who can’t afford houses or proper health care. It is a judgment on the pettiness of the political arguments that oppose universal health care. It says something about the grace we are called to show in our dealings with the world and our call to live justice.

In my heart I might argue that if the world were fair, every person would have a living wage, every person would have a place to live, everyone would have enough to eat and basic health care—but we all know the world is not fair.

Well, the idea behind this story is that God expects something a little more powerful than fairness from those of us who choose to become the servant disciples of Jesus—God is inviting us to embrace the amazing way of grace and become little outposts of an outbreak of the reign of God—tiny encampments of the mercy and caring of God, small settlements of justice doers reflecting the goodness of God in a world that defines fairness mathematically rather than mystically.

One more thing: Were you ever in love? If you were or if you are, then you know that love has absolutely nothing to do with fairness. Relational fairness is about quid pro quo. Relational fairness is about giving something to get something. You scratch my back and I will scratch yours. You invite me to your house for dinner and I will invite you to my house for dinner. I give you a present, you give me a present. I am nice to you so you will be nice to me—all a part of a very pleasant and very necessary social contract. Polite people do this sort of thing all the time and there is nothing wrong with it, it’s all very fair, but it’s not love.

Love is giving expecting nothing in return. Love is sacrifice without any expectation of reward. If I love you only because I am hoping that you will love me, that may be fair, but it is not love, it is business. Love is giving yourself away, because it is really the only thing any of us has to give. It is the way of God.

Our little bible story ends with a very strange sentence. Jesus says: “the last will be first, and the first will be last.” That too is not fair. That too is not the way the world works, but then we have a different path to follow. We are called to follow the way of Jesus. We are called to love and we are called to forgive, we are called to work for justice and peace and we are called to give, because we are loved and we are forgiven, and we have received God’s grace in Jesus Christ. It’s not fair; it never was and never will be. We didn’t earn it, we don’t really deserve it, but it’s a free gift. Accept that gift and you will know abundant life on your journey today, and forever and in the process, together we might make this world a better place.

Amen.