

“God Isn’t Fair — God Is Generous”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church — Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 20: 1-16

When we are children, there are a lot of things which don’t seem to be fair to us. Our big brother or sister gets to stay overnight with his or her friend, but we have to stay home. We don’t get to play for the baseball or soccer team because we’re not good enough or are too small. Our teacher seems to be extra tough on us, while the other kids snicker and laugh at us for needing extra attention. As teenagers this seems to be magnified, as driving privileges may be revoked, we may be grounded for breaking curfew, or even worse — our parents won’t let us date the boy or girl we have fallen in love with!

When we say that something is not fair, that usually reflects our own expectations and assumptions. I may think it’s unfair that I have to pay taxes for something, while someone else may think that it is simply part of life and is perfectly fair. Fairness is a very subjective thing. It varies widely from person to person, but stirs our emotions deeply when we feel we have been treated unfairly. It is based on an ideal, a set of rules which are both accepted by everyone but also differ slightly with each individual. We would hope that everyone would be treated fairly, but we especially are going to look out for ourselves and make sure no one does us wrong.

More than anything, we expect God to be fair. We believe in a God of justice, a God of righteousness, a God who views everyone equally and without prejudice. We have been given the moral law by which we are to live our lives: the Ten Commandments, the Great Commandment, the Sermon on the Mount. We have always been raised with the notion that if we follow these “rules” which God has given, then we will be welcomed into the heavenly kingdom with open arms because of our faithfulness. That only seems fair. And what we infer from this thinking is that anyone who fails to do what is right and acceptable in God’s eyes will not join him in the kingdom. That, too, only seems fair.

But you know what? God isn’t fair. Let me rephrase that: God isn’t fair like we would like God to be fair. We can’t put our expectations and assumptions on God and expect him to act accordingly. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “God isn’t fair; God is generous.”

We don’t need a better example of this fact than in the parable we have read today. If there is one story which each of us probably thinks is crazy and mind-boggling based on its fairness, the parable of the workers in the vineyard would be it. I really can’t add anything to what clearly

happens: all the workers are paid the same wage, even though some worked for one hour, and others worked an entire day. That's it. Plain and simple. The owner is extremely generous to those who haven't worked long, and those who have worked all day leave grumbling as a result of this obvious unjust owner.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells a wonderful story which may reflect some of your memories and help you to relate to this parable in a different way. She writes: *I remember waiting in line for the Saturday afternoon matinee at the local movie theater when I was a little girl. It was summertime, and there were always lots of us there. Our parents would drop us off in the heat of the afternoon, giddy at the prospect of a couple hours' peace and quiet. We stood in the shade of the awning outside and waited for the box office to open, our dollar bills burning holes in our pockets as we debated the economics of popcorn versus junior mints or milk duds . . .*

Where every one of us wanted to be was right up there at the front of the line. That was the best place to be, not only because you were the first inside, but because you were there when the moment came, when the doors were unlocked and the timid-looking manager pushed them open, so that a great wave of cold air rolled out of the dark theater and hit you like a blast from the arctic, an icy promise of everything that you waited for inside. That was the moment everyone waited for, and those who had won places at the front of the line got the very best of it.

I cannot imagine anything more disheartening than if the manager had come outside and reversed the order, telling those of us at the front of the line to stay put, while he invited those at the end of the line — those who had just arrived, those who were not even hot yet from standing in the sun — to enter the theater first. I think I would have cried; I certainly would have booed, because it would not have been fair. Those of us at the front of the line had earned our reward; we knew it, and so did everyone else. On what grounds would anyone dare reverse the order?" (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Beginning at the End," in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, p.15)

And yet, that is exactly what happens to the workers in the vineyard. The owner "dared" to reverse the order of things and paid each one the same amount, no matter how long they had worked for him. The owner "dared" to do things his way, against the assumed way of the workers, against the assumed way of society. The owner appeared to treat the workers unfairly.

This is a story about the kingdom of God. This is a lesson about how God will act toward us when he welcomes us into the kingdom. How are we supposed to put our faith in a God who might turn everything we understand upside down? What kind of grace is this which rewards the slackers around us and penalizes the hard-working stiffes who do what they are supposed to do? If this is God's idea of justice, do we really want to

have anything to do with it?

The workers did not own the wages which they received. The owner of the vineyard owned the money he would distribute. The workers did not have clauses in their contracts which said that if others came along and were paid a full-day's wage, then they would be paid more proportionately.

They had agreed with the owner for a full-day's wage, and that is what the owner gave them. The owner had every right to do with his money what he pleased. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Is not God allowed to do what God chooses with what belongs to God?

Grace is not a sentimental thing which we think we are singing about in hymns like "Amazing Grace." It is an eye-opening, shocking act of God which will turn your world upside down if you're not watching. God's grace is nothing we control, nothing we have a say in, nothing which we have a right to say may be unfair. Why do we all tend to walk away from this parable grumbling to ourselves that God appears to be unfair with his grace? "Or are you envious because I am generous?"

I think it's interesting that almost all of us view this parable only from one point-of-view: the workers who feel wronged by the owner. That's because most of us are here because we are good Christians who come to church each Sunday, read our Bible, teach or attend Church School, say our prayers each night — do everything we have been taught to do in order to reach the kingdom of heaven. We live in a world which views people not as well off as us as people who cannot follow the rules, who are in the state they are in because they don't work hard enough or simply live off of our tax dollars on welfare. We are standing at the front of the line, they are standing at the back.

But suppose for a moment that it is you back there, craning your neck for even a glimpse of the theater, knowing you will never make it, that all the tickets will be gone long before you get there, and that you are about to have one more long hot afternoon on your hands while everyone else is laughing and eating popcorn inside the cool, dark theater. It makes you want to cry; it makes you want to give up, when all of a sudden a stir goes through the crowd. The manager appears out of nowhere and walks right up to you, a stack of blue tickets in his hand. 'We're starting at this end today,' he says, handing you a ticket, and everyone at the end of the line begins to cheer (Barbara Brown Taylor, 19).

I can tell you that I feel like I have lived this parable this past week. I feel like I've been at the front of the line, and then been placed at the back of the line, and throughout it all, I've questioned God's fairness.

I've been with my parents from Sunday evening through yesterday morning, in Charleston, West Virginia, as my dad had a heart catheterization on Monday morning. It was assumed his symptoms of fatigue and shortness of breath were caused by some constriction in his arteries, and the heart

cath would take care of that, and we'd be home on Tuesday, at the latest. That's when it felt like we were at the front of the line.

The procedure went well, and his heart and arteries were perfectly fine. What wasn't fine was his blood. All his levels were low - very, very low. By that evening, a hematologist was called in, and Dad had received a platelet transfusion and two units of blood. By Thursday, we received confirmation what we suspected: Dad has some form of leukemia, and that is the cause of his fatigue. We are now in the process of determining what type it is, and how best to treat it for the best chances for remission.

We go in for something routine, and we come out with cancer. We start at the front of the line, and it feels like we go right to the back of the line.

But here's the thing. Whether you're at the back of the line or the front of the line, God is generous. God is generous in the incredible care given to Dad by all of the doctors, nurses, and support staff in the hospital. God is generous in Dad making it through the heart cath without any complications, when his blood levels - confirmed afterwards - actually made that procedure very, very risky. God is generous in now knowing a definitive cause of his fatigue, and his excellent health otherwise being a positive factor as he faces future treatments. And God is generous in the fact that after Dad giving twenty gallons of blood over his lifetime, he is now the recipient of that life-saving gift.

God is not fair — God is generous. That is the reassurance we have that no matter who we are or what we might do, we will be saved by the grace he gives us in Jesus Christ our Lord. And who knows: if you find yourself grumbling that life is unfair, that might actually be when God is being gracious to you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.