

"It's Not Fair!" July 15, 2007

Bible Passage: Matthew 20:1-16 (The Message)

Once upon a time, a landowner went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. They agreed on a wage of a dollar a day, and went to work. Later, about nine o'clock, the landowner saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. They went. He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o'clock. At five o'clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, 'Why are you standing around all day doing nothing?' They said, 'Because no one hired us.' He told them to go to work in his vineyard. When the day's work was over, the owner of the vineyard instructed his foreman, 'Call the workers in and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first.'

Those hired at five o'clock came up and were each given a dollar. When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But they got the same, each of them one dollar. Taking the dollar, they groused angrily to the manager, 'These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.'

He replied to the one speaking for the rest, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn't we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can't I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?' Here it is. **The Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first.**

That story is one of the parables that is presumed to have told to the disciples by Jesus. It is an example of one of those stories that Jesus told in order for the disciples to understand a lesson that Jesus was trying to teach. Now, I don't know what you think of that story, but the first thought that comes to my mind is that those workers didn't have a very good union in place, or else the pay at the end of the day would have come out a lot different. The second thought that comes to my mind is that this is a story of obvious unfairness. How in the world can the workers who showed up on the last hour of the day get the same pay as the guys who were there all day? This seems like a rather crazy story to put in the Bible. What lesson was in this story for the disciples? Even more pointedly, is there any meaningful application of this story to our lives today?

Consider this somewhat updated version of this story. When some of the people who had been displaced by Hurricane Katrina, ended up at a school in a Texas community, a sense of unrest washed over the community. A lot of loving hospitality and special attention was showered upon the evacuees, which in turn caused problems among the poorest of the poor among the locals who had been suffering from neglect for as long as they could remember. It wasn't fair that these recently displaced people should suddenly be receiving the gracious treatment that had been denied others who had been in the community for years. Fights and yelling matches broke out. The community struggled with a genuine justice issue. It was unfair that those locals who had endured neglect saw newcomers being welcomed with a graciousness they'd never received. The truth is, they

should have experienced the same graciousness, but they didn't. That sounds a little like the parable of the workers. But in fact, it's a little worse, because the newcomers got even more than those who had been around longer.

Any child between 6 and 8 years old can recognize the injustice in either of these stories, because that is the age at which we begin to develop our sense of fairness...perhaps because we learn to count really well. Those are the years we first begin to utter those magical words: "It's not fair".

If you grew up with at least one sibling, you know the world of unfairness. "He got 5 M&M's and I only got 4. That's not fair!"

"She gets to stay up until 9:30 and I have to go to bed at 8:30. That's not fair!" "He's in my seat. I wanted to sit by the window...that's not fair!"

And our parents tell us, "Get over it. Life's not fair."

Perhaps the lesson of the parable is that simple and that direct. Would Jesus perhaps have told that story to the disciples to reinforce the unfairness of life? Through this parable, we are reminded that life's not fair, so deal with it...like our mothers often tell us. In addition, though, this parable seems to tell us to deal with it by doing the right thing anyway. Work all day for the same pay as someone who only worked an hour because it's the right thing to do. Similarly in the parable of the prodigal son, are we perhaps being instructed to work hard and not squander your inheritance like the older brother, even though the younger brother loses his money and comes home to a party? Should we do these things because they are the right things to do even when others are "getting away with" less work for the same pay? Well, that hardly seems fair does it? Perhaps that's the reason the parable is there.

Or, perhaps there is another meaning to the story. Many Bible scholars suggest that in this parable God is the landowner and we are the workers in the vineyard.

The parable shows us how God loves each of us equally...no matter how hard we work...or don't work...no matter when we start "producing". God loves each of us no matter what we do or don't do. This is a parable of God's grace to us...equally. But let's get honest for a moment. It seems like Jesus is telling us in the story that God isn't fair. First, God promises the laborers who work all day long that they'll receive a fair day's wage, and they agree. Then more workers are hired later in the day and promised a fair wage. Still later, the landowner (God) hires more workers, and then, almost at quitting time, a couple more stragglers who obviously can't put in more than an hour or so are hired. At the end of the day, he pays them all the same, and a great scowl begins to form over our mouths and our eyes tighten up. "Wait a minute," we say, "*that's not fair.*" And, of course, from a human perspective, it isn't. But, remember, what the landowner promised each group of laborers was that they'd receive a fair day's wages. The problem isn't with God's grace, it's with the way we perceive it.

Sometimes, despite our education, our political correctness, and our diversity training, we still find ourselves falling into the same childish thoughts we had as children. We can say everyone is the same, but we don't really want it to be true. We each want to be more

equal than, better than, more important than and more noticed than everyone else. If all of the workers in the field really get paid the same amount...if the younger brother gets to squander his money and come home to a party, then we really are the same. But here's the real secret to how we think much of the time: We only like the equal treatment that the younger brother and those last hired workers receive when we are the ones in those positions. Otherwise, let's face it -- when we are in the other positions...when we are the workers who started early in the day, or the older brother...we say, "It's not fair!" And we utter those words because we are jealous and envious of the grace that the others are receiving. Perhaps instead of saying "it's not fair" we should say, "I want what you have" or "I wish I had the attention you are receiving," or "I don't like that you have that." "It's not fair" has become the shortest way to express those feelings.

Nancy Mitford once said, "**The great advantage of living in a large family is that early lesson of life's essential unfairness.**"

Robert De Moor explains how his family handled uneven productivity. Perhaps we can learn a thing or two from this story:

"**Back in Ontario when the apples ripened, Mom would sit all seven of us down, Dad included, with pans and paring knives until the mountain of fruit was reduced to neat rows of filled canning jars. She never bothered keeping track of how many we did, though the younger ones undoubtedly proved more of a nuisance than a help: cut fingers, squabbles over who got which pan, apple core fights. But when the job was done, the reward for everyone was the same: the largest chocolate-dipped cone money could buy. A stickler might argue it wasn't quite fair since the older ones actually peeled apples. But I can't remember anyone complaining about it. A family understands it operates under a different set of norms than a courtroom. In fact, when the store ran out of ice cream and my younger brother had to make do with a popsicle, we felt sorry for him despite his lack of productivity (he'd eaten all the apples he'd peeled that day, both of them).**"

Ultimately, I think the parable of the workers in the vineyard has great application to our lives today. We all appreciate receiving that unbelievable grace which is given to the last workers, but we are almost unable to give to others that level of grace...and that's why we have God. One of the best parts about this parable is that we can see the vast difference between our humanness and God's godliness. I think that sometimes we shrink God. We forget that God is not just a large human. We forget that God is everywhere and is not only filled with love, God IS love. We just can't do what God does. We will sometimes be able to love others, offer fairness and extend grace. Most of the time, we won't. We will disappoint others and count M&M's on a plate. God on the other hand, continues to teach us how to live. God will always love us, God will always offer us fairness and grace and God will always smile when we say, "It's not fair!"

Closing:

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote: "**All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having.**" In other words, all that we write, all that we do and all that we have comes by the grace of God. I think that's a good thing to remember.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

