



“It’s Not Fair!”

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Scripture (NRSV):

Matthew 20:1-16

20 “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 “Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ 5 And they went. “Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. 6 Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’ 7 “‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied. “He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8 “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ 9 When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. 10 Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. 11 When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 ‘These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’ 13 “But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion? 14 Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. 15 Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ 16 So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”

Sermon:

The kingdom of heaven is like... we should all cringe when we hear or read these words. The kingdom of heaven is like... How can we understand what the kingdom of heaven is like, when most of us struggle to comprehend life on earth? Life is hard; bad things happen to good people; natural disasters wreak havoc making life difficult for the rich and even more impossible for the poor. This is not fair. Where is justice? Where is God?

And then we hear this parable. This parable that describes a scene which is the epitome of unfair treatment, and like the laborers who were hired first, we are right to say, "It's not fair!" It's not fair that the workers who only worked one hour get them same pay as those who worked from sunup to sundown. It's not fair that the landowner gave everyone the same wages, when some worked harder than others. It's simply not fair. Lots of things aren't fair...to our way of thinking. But as disciples of Jesus, we aren't called to our way of thinking, we are called to His.

I'd like to comment, briefly, on some details of this passage. To start with, let's talk about that denarius. What is a denarius, anyway? Denarius was the normal pay for manual labor, but was barely enough to maintain a family at the subsistence level. "A denarius a day might support one person, but not a family, at the level of minimal survival. By all accounts," the commentary says, "laborers lived hard, and often short, lives." So, when the landowner agrees with the first group to pay them a denarius, he is agreeing to pay them the normal daily rate, what was just and fair.

And, when the landowner told the next group that he would pay them "what was right," those men were trusting the landowner to be fair, with not even a verbal guarantee of what the amount would be. And, it's curious that the landowner would go into the marketplace himself to hire laborers, and to go in throughout the day was really quite strange. Why did he go in after noon? Why go in again in the late afternoon, "before sunset"? With only an hour left to work, why bother?

I've always read the last part of this parable, the part where the landowner answers the resentful questions of the first group, as the landowner being gentle. "Friend," he says, but I learned something new from the commentary. It turns out that 'Friend' does not mean 'friend' in the personal sense. It is more like 'mister' when used pointedly without a name. It is found only in Matthew in the NT, used always by a superior to a subordinate who is in the

wrong. The landowner is emphasizing how wrong the first group is to be complaining. Their complaints are unfounded. They are simply resentful. Their attitude is all wrong.

You know, it's fitting that I preach this sermon on this day, as it was four years ago, this Sunday, that I was installed as your assistant pastor, and, to our earthly way of thinking, the circumstances that brought me to you were unfair. Most of you know my story already, but for the new folks among us, here's the short version. I used to be a licensed pastor in a very conservative denomination, studying for ordination, and only two classes and about six months shy of that goal, when I realized that I am gay. I was fired from my job, stripped of my clergy credentials, and kicked out of my church and the denomination. Some would say that it was unfair. And, I suppose in a sense it was, but...if I hadn't been kicked out, I wouldn't be here, and how can I be upset about that? How can I be upset that I have a loving wife? How can I be upset that I have a loving church family? How can I be upset that I get to tell Spokane's LGBTQ community that God loves them? NO, I am not upset; I am thankful.

We can change our way of thinking by remembering that all of this, our lives, our call to follow Jesus, our ministry to Spokane, is all a gift. I can't imagine what my life would be like without the love of God in it. As bad as I am, with my temper, my anxieties, and the endless list of my other failings, with the love of God in my life, I am able to love others, to see others as made in the image of God, as worthy of love and deserving of grace. I am imperfect, but I am still God's child, and I am so, so thankful for that. Without the love of God, my life would be empty.

Being thankful keeps us from becoming resentful when things don't go our way. When we experience loss, either personal or material. When life hands us lemons...thankfulness is what turns them into lemonade. I do not mean to minimize how hard life is, and how very, very difficult it is to not become resentful when our economy crashes and we lose our jobs; when our health fails; when we experience loss of all kinds. Life is hard, that is true, but we can still be thankful for what we have.

Personally, I get resentful when I compare what I have with what others have...and it's funny, but I always seem to compare up, not down. I look at how much more some folks have, and it makes what I have look like less. Why don't I compare down, and see how little others have, and be thankful for how much I do? Well, now I'm preaching at myself...

This parable, this entire section of Matthew from chapter 19, verse 16, through this parable, is instruction to the disciples. Not to the crowds, but to Jesus' closest disciples, the twelve people He called to follow him. This parable is for us, the church. Those of us who have answered the call to follow Jesus, his life and teachings. Whom Jesus taught to pray by giving us what we call *The Lord's Prayer*.

In the Lord's Prayer, which we say as a church most Sundays, we say these words, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." Those of us who follow the life and teachings of Jesus are called to work to bring the kingdom of God, the kin-dom of God to earth, because here on earth we don't see the kin-dom of God at work, we see the kingdoms of humanity, kingdoms that make some rulers and some servants. Kingdoms of superiority and inferiority, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders. We decide who's good and who's bad. Who won and who lost. Who's in and who's out. We show partiality.

Partiality is an old-fashioned word. You still hear it in the South. They'll say, "I'm not partial to spicy food." Or, "I'm partial to sweet tea."

Definition of partial

1: of or relating to a part rather than the whole: not general or total a partial solution a partial payment

2: inclined to favor one party more than the other: biased

3: markedly fond of someone or something —used with to partial; I'm partial to pizza. Deb is partial to steak.

J. S. Mill, philosopher and economist, said, "It is inconsistent with justice to be partial." But we show partiality, even though we shouldn't. The Book of James, chapter 2, says, "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man."

Yes, we show partiality, but God does not. Deuteronomy 10:17, says, “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.” And again in Acts, we read, “Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” God shows no partiality, and we are called to have the mind of God. To see things from a heavenly perspective, not an earthly one.

This is why I said, when we hear the words, “The Kingdom of God is like...” we should cringe, because it’s just so foreign to us. It’s impossible for us to see things from God’s perspective, but we can at least try. One of the commentators, Kathryn D, Blanchard, had this to say, “God’s standards are alien to human standards, but God’s people are expected to behave according to the alien standards, neither demanding their rights nor begrudging others’ good fortunes.”

If only the first group of laborers would remember how they started, without jobs, perhaps then they would be thankful for the work and the pay. But their complaint is that the landowner, “has made them” the ones who got hired last, “equal to us.” Equal. The first group is angry because they were treated equally. You see, they thought they should get treated better, better than the others, because they were first. Their expectation was that they would get more, since they had done more work, but that is not what they agreed to. They agreed to a denarius, and that is what they got. They should have been happy. They should have been thankful.

But because the landowner was generous, they were resentful. Because, in their earthly determination of right and wrong, they were treated unfairly, they were resentful. They were looking for equity, but what they found was generosity. And it’s not fair.

We are right to say, “It isn’t fair” – the love of God is better than fair, it is generous. Love that denies no one access, love that calls and calls and calls even into the 11th hour, love that calls all to the work of bringing the kingdom of God to earth. The love of God is better than fair – it is generous.

God is better than fair. In God’s kingdom, all are equal. All are welcome. The radical equality of God defies human understanding. It insults our earthly ideas of justice and equality. The radical equality of God puts everyone on the same playing field, extends to

everyone the same grace, and envelops everyone in the extravagance of love given freely to all.

Today we are singing one of my favorite hymns, *The Love of God*. It's the hymn printed on the insert in your bulletin. I fell in love with this hymn when I was about 14 years old, and I loved the final verse so much, that I committed it to memory. Its words have come back to me throughout my life, as they remind me how great the love of God is.

Translated into more modern terms, it says, "*If we could fill the ocean with ink, and if the sky was made of paper, and if every growing thing on earth was a pen, and if every person on earth was a writer, even then, it would be impossible to write out the love of God, because it would drain the ocean dry, and as massive and unending as the sky is, it couldn't contain all the words.*"

The love of God is vast beyond all measure; extravagant and extreme; gracious love that is truly amazing.

Please stand with me as you are able, as we sing together of The Love of God.

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.