

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

**A-Pentecost 17
Matthew 20:1-16**

**24 September 2023
Salem, Bridgeport**

“It’s Not Fair!”

Be honest.

When you heard the reading of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard just now, did your heart leap for joy? Were you thrilled when you heard that the workers who’d toiled and slaved all day long in the hot sun were going to get the same day’s wages as those who’d worked only one hour? I’m guessing no.

Let’s face it, this is not one of Jesus’ more popular parables.

In fact, it might be the one most likely to voted “the parable most likely to be hated”. And for good reason!

The parable runs against the grain of one of our most deeply cherished values, the value of hard work and just reward: the more you work and the more productive you are, the more you ought to get paid.

While that certainly isn’t always the case on a large scale anyway – people born with money can let their money work for them –

it’s still the way we tend to look at ourselves and the people around us.

If we show up for a job on time, work hard all day, and even stay late, we’re not going to be happy if we find out the guy who shows up late, goofs off, and leaves early, is paid the same.

And this is the complaint of those who worked all day: “You have made them equal to us.”

The parable provokes one of the most primitive cries of childhood, when a child who feels cheated screams: “It’s not fair!”

But before we dismiss this parable and put it back on the shelf marked, “Bible passages not to be taken seriously”.

let’s consider the possibility that there’s a lesson to be learned here, that what’s going on in this parable is nothing less than a battle between heaven & earth, a battle between human justice and God’s justice, a battle between our will and God’s will – and that, even though we think we just want to get what we deserve, what we really want is what God knows that we need.

Listen to the parable once more:

A landowner went out early in the morning and hired all the workers who were waiting, promising to pay them a denarius – what was considered to be a livable wage, what would cover a family’s expenses for a day.

The landowner then went back at 9:00, at noon, at 3:00 and at 5:00, again, hiring everyone who was there waiting for work, and promising to pay them fairly.

So far, so good. In our minds, we’ve already got it figured out – they’re going to get a pro rata share of one denarius. According to our standards, that’d be fair.

At the end of the day the landowner had all the workers line up, starting with those who came at 5. Surprisingly he paid them a denarius, a full day’s wage!

Still, no problem.

If he paid one denarius for one hour’s work, then he must be going to pay one denarius per hour. That would be surprisingly generous, but who would complain about that?!

This is where the parable takes an unexpected turn, for as the workers filed by to receive their wages, he paid them all the same – one denarius each, no matter how long they worked.

And hear comes that old childhood cry: “It’s not fair!” they complained. The landowner was not playing by their rules.

Never mind that they got precisely what they were promised; the fact that the others got the same was a pill too big to swallow.

What was it about those workers who’d worked all day that made them so angry when the others got paid the same?

The first problem was the fact that they lacked the right motivation – they were doing a job for the pay and not out of a sense of purpose or pleasure.

The story is told of Yogi Berra. The NY Yankees were at their peak and were negotiating contracts for the next year. A group of reporters interviewed players as they emerged from the owner’s office, and one of them asked Yogi Berra about the terms of his contract.

In his characteristically, plain-spoken style, he said, “I’m gonna get to play baseball again next year for the Yankees, and would you believe it, they’re gonna pay me besides!”

The first problem was the fact that they lacked the right motivation.
The second problem was that they lacked a sense of gratitude.
They had been there waiting, hoping for work, and they had gotten it.
Maybe they had initially been grateful, but their gratitude did not run very deep.
As soon as they heard others had been paid the same amount for less work, gratitude turned to resentment.

& something else about gratitude: It keeps you humble when you stop to consider those less fortunate.
You know the old adage: “I complained because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.”
The first problem was the fact that they lacked the right motivation.
The second problem was that they lacked a sense of gratitude.

And the third problem was that they lacked a sense of community –
they were looking only at what benefited them, and not at what benefited all.

Consider that perhaps those who were hired to work at 5:00 had been left standing idle all day,
not because they didn't want to work or didn't try to get a job, but because they were the least fit to work.
Likely, it was the younger, stronger, smarter, more assertive men who got to the hiring spot 1st.
The landowner knew that which is why he went out again at 9:00, and again at noon,
and again at 3:00, & even once more at 5:00 to make sure that EVERYONE was included –
even the older, weaker, crippled, and mentally challenged.

There's a play by Timothy Thompson based on this parable in which 2 brothers vying for work.
John is strong and capable; Philip is just as willing but has lost a hand in an accident.
When the landowner comes, John is there on time to be taken with the first wave of workers,
and as he labors in the field, he looks up the lane for some sign of Philip.
Other workers are brought to the field, but Philip is not among them.
John is grateful to have the work, but feels empty knowing that Philip is just as needful as he.
Finally, the last group of workers arrive, and Philip is among them.
John is relieved to know that Philip will get to work at least one hour.
But, as the drama unfolds, and those who came last get paid a full days' wages, John rejoices,
knowing that Philip – his brother – will have the money necessary to feed his family.
When it comes his turn to stand before the landowner and receive his pay,
instead of complaining as the others, John throws out his hand and says with tears in his eyes,
“Thank you, my lord, for what you've done for us today!”

God's justice arises out of a sense of community in which we see the “11th hour” workers as our brothers and sisters
whose needs are every bit as important as our own.

In the parable, God's justice is that everyone got to work,
and everyone was given the essential earnings to feed his family.
The inequity of their varying hours of work was offset by the inequity of their varying strengths and abilities.
And this is God's justice, not that we get what we deserve, but that we get what we need.

Well, I suppose when it's all said and done,
there will probably always be situations that trigger in us that childish cry, “It's not fair!”
It's not God's response, but it is ours – because we're human, after all, and not God.
But perhaps that sinful, selfish, self-righteous response in us can actually help us find a bit of grace in this parable,
for if we really got what our sinful, selfish, self-righteous selves deserved, we'd be in trouble to say the least.
But thanks be to God that it's not about what we deserve – but about what we need.
And what we need is the over-whelming, never-ending, reckless love and grace of God. Amenⁱ

ⁱ This sermon makes use of sermon-writing resources at Sermonwrtier.com,
in particular a sermon on this text from 2004 by Philip W. McLarty.