

Matthew 20:1-16 New Revised Standard Version

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

We are continuing our sermon series No Fair! as we acknowledge that there will be no fair, The Great State Fair of Texas, this year, but we also look at some of the challenging teachings of Jesus. Jesus’ lessons often leave us saying to ourselves and to others, “No fair!” Last week we talked about forgiveness and Jesus’ words to us to forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times. The Greek word that Jesus uses could also be understood as seventy times seven times which is 490 times! Forgiveness isn’t fair because some people deserve to be forgiven and some people don’t. Practicing forgiveness is one of the most difficult things that we do.

Jesus’ story today is offensive to our sense of fairness. In our world you get what you earn. You put in a hard day’s work and you get a day’s pay. Right? Someone asks Jesus what the kingdom of God looks like. What they are asking Jesus and what we are asking Jesus, is, how do we tell the difference between the way the world works and the way God works?

Jesus tells a story about how God works. Someone owned a vineyard and it came time for the harvest. Harvest time means you need extra hands. The landowner went to go hire some day laborers. They agree on a wage, a fair amount, what it takes to feed a family for a day, then they jump in the back of the pickup and head off to the vineyard for a long day. Day laborers don’t have a regular job, but they try and find work every day to feed their family. They live on that edge between subsistence and poverty.

As the day goes on, the landowner keeps saying, “We need more workers.” At 9 am, at noon, at 3 pm, and even at 5 pm, even though quitting time is 6 pm. Each time, the landowner goes back to the same street corner where there is still a long line of hopeful day laborers. The landowner takes as many as can fit in the back of the truck. They don’t talk about money, there is just a promise that they will get paid what is right. The last crop of workers barely has time to get their hands dirty before the bell rings and it’s time to quit.

I wonder about the workers who were on the corner waiting for work at 5 pm, knowing that quitting time was soon. What kind of person can’t get hired until the end of the day? Who are the people who can’t get jobs? Maybe they are disabled or a released felon? Maybe they are elderly and can’t get other work? These aren’t lazy people, we don’t know their story, but we know that they are ready to work. And at the end of the day, they have not been picked. Who

doesn't get hired in our society even when they have been doing what they need to do to get employed?¹

The landowner has the last workers hired stand at the front of the line and when the landowner hands them their pay, they receive the full day's wage for their one hour of work. What? As the word spreads down the line, to the 3 pm workers, the noon workers, the 9 am workers, and finally those who have been working since the crack of dawn hear the news and the excitement builds. "If the landowner gave them that much, imagine what we're going to get!" The line moves up, but the pay scale does not. Every worker receives the same amount of money.

When the crack of dawn workers had agreed on the wage that morning, it sounded fine. Generous, even. Now that they've seen someone else get that amount of money for much less work, they are furious. It isn't fair! All day as they worked, they imagined the coins in their pocket. Now, it feels downright insulting. This isn't fair; they deserve more than the others. They demand an explanation, and all they get is, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. I'm paying you exactly what we agreed to. If I want to pay someone else more, what is that to you?" Then, the landowner goes a little further, questioning their motives, even their character, "Or are you envious because I am generous?"²

We know this isn't fair. Whatever the agreed deal was, the workers who worked all day deserve more than those who worked just an hour. Life in this world tells us this is unfair, but Jesus is telling a story about the world as God wants it to be. A world where everyone is treated the same, despite what they have contributed or what they have. A world where everyone is accorded the same dignity and reward.³

Did you notice that when the landowner was paying the workers and they were grumbling, he called them "friend?" It's as if Jesus is telling us the categories that we put people in, rich, poor, landowner, worker, all of those divisions of wealth and power don't really matter. What matters is relationship. The landowner wants the workers to see each other differently.

We talk about equity and we wonder what does real equity look like in our schools, in our workplaces, in our city, and in our nation. Pete Buttigieg has a new podcast and he interviewed writer Glennon Doyle. She said, "We accept the protection that the police offer us, but we don't look over there and ask what the police are doing to them. We go into our elementary schools demanding that our children have every technology, but we don't turn our heads and ask why the school down the road doesn't have clean water. We accept our relative comfort and safety, and the cost of that is our full humanity. We become less human when we only care about ourselves and people who look like us."⁴ Equity starts with relationship. It starts with listening to the stories of others, especially those who we don't know as well. We don't have to retreat into our separate corners and we don't always have to agree. But, we can listen.

Jesus finishes up his story with another one of those nonsensical gut punches he likes to leave us with, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." This isn't how we think of fairness and justice but it is for Jesus. It is what the kingdom of heaven is like. It is the scandalous nature of grace because God's grace is freely given. We don't deserve grace. When we see someone else who is also undeserving receive grace, we have to remember that is the nature of grace. It is an incredible gift.

¹ Thanks to the Working Preacher podcast - https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1296

² <https://www.davidlose.net/topics/preaching-2/dear-partner-in-preaching/>

³ <https://www.davidlose.net/topics/preaching-2/dear-partner-in-preaching/>

⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFM8psEBHss/>

Jesus accepts, loves, and redeems every single one of us, not because of who we are or what we've done or not done. We want God to punish our enemies, but God is a God of mercy. Jesus calls each of us friend and invites us to see those around us as friends and fellow children of God.⁵

This story gives us a window into what justice looks like to Jesus. The workers who have worked all day don't say it isn't fair, they say you have made them equal to us. You have given dignity to those who we think don't deserve it. You have given equal share or full privileges to those who don't measure up in our perspective. We think it is right, it is fair, it is just when good things happen to us, but not to those other people. They don't live on the right side of town. They don't have the right skin color. They didn't work hard enough. They didn't earn it. They don't deserve God's grace. They didn't pay their dues. They didn't even try.⁶

Then, we realize that we are standing on a lonely street corner. We are desperate and hopeless with no place to go. We see the truck pull up, and the voice calls out that there is a place for us. There is work for us to do. In the bed of the truck there are some other people, but they don't look nice. Should we hop in the truck? Would you? With those people? Maybe I should stay by myself, but then I will miss out on all of the goodness that God offers. There is a place for me, even though I don't deserve it. I'm gonna to go hop in the truck, do you want to join me?⁷

⁵ <https://www.davidlose.net/topics/preaching-2/dear-partner-in-preaching/>

⁶ Thanks to the Working Preacher podcast - https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1296

⁷ A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. P. 61.