

The Unfairness of God©

Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20:1-16

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I've been thinking a lot, this week, about fairness; about justice. We're all about justice and what's fair in this life. Aren't we?

Growing up in a family with six children – me being the oldest – I definitely had a sense of thinking I should have some privilege for being the oldest.

I mean, they counted on me for so much. I had to watch my younger siblings all the time! I had to help feed and dress them. I was responsible for doing most of the dishes every night. (Wah Wah!)

And, did I get even so much as an allowance for all I did? Nope. Not a dime!

But ... when my brother, David, just two years younger than me ... said he couldn't dry the dishes anymore because the dish towel hurt his fingers ... they let him off the hook.

Why? Because, he also helped outside. He helped feed the cattle; he helped put up hay in the summertime; he mowed, not just the yard but out in the pasture, he – well, you get it. He did so much outside that he didn't have to do inside work.

AND ... he got paid for it! And you can imagine what my mantra was, can't you?

THAT'S JUST NOT FAIR!

Of course, I didn't realize until we were grown, that David really got paid very little and it was just for putting up hay, and, he bought all his school clothes and supplies with that little bit of money! And he was thinking **THAT'S JUST NOT FAIR.**

I think many of us hear this story today from Matthew and it kind of rubs us wrong ... it rubs against our sense of what is fair and just, doesn't it?

If you lived back in Palestine in that day, in September, you would know that the grapes in the vineyards were ripening fast and they needed to be harvested quickly because the heavy rains would surely come at the end of the month and the crops would be lost if you didn't act fast.

The market place was like a job center. If you were without work, if you were on the low end of the work force – a laborer trying to support your family – you would hang around there for as long as it took to get work for whatever length of time you could – a day, or an hour. You would just be happy to have something.

But you probably would not expect to get a full day's wage if you had only worked for an hour or so, would you?

And if you were there from early in the day until quitting time, you surely *would* expect to get paid for the entire day – *more* than what those latecomers would get. I mean, that would just be fair. Right?

But Jesus says the landowner didn't pay attention to those expectations. He didn't follow those rules.

And, he didn't try to hide what he was doing either! He could have paid first those who were hired first, what he promised them; the wage they agreed on. They would have been on their way and probably not known that he gave those who came later the same amount.

But instead, he asked for the first hired workers to go to the end of the line and he had the later ones get their pay first. It was something to see – standing there at the end of the line!

Don't you bet those at the end were thinking, "Wow! If he's paying those who came so late in the day as much as he promised us for a full day's work, we're probably going to get a good bonus!"

Well, it didn't turn out that way and they were not too happy about it, crying out just like I did about my siblings – "THAT'S JUST NOT FAIR!"

Of course, this parable is really about God. Jesus starts by saying: "For the kingdom of heaven is like ... this."

Jesus is saying something about *us*, and, something about *God* in this parable. It shows a picture of us mortals; of how we think, how we look at the world and our lives, and each other; at what we expect.

And it shows us that **God is not like us**. At first, we might bristle at the idea that *this* is how God is – God, whom we think is just and fair. Instead, God seems to give equal reward to all God's children.

Sometimes we listen to one of Jesus' stories and we scratch our heads, puzzled, because God doesn't seem to be fitting into the image we have formed of God in our minds.

Like – the one who has been a Christian all their lives – living good, righteous lives, being regular attendees at church, serving on committees and boards, always bringing food to the sick or the grieving.

Surely that person's place in the kingdom will be a little higher – full of more rewards – than the one who barely squeaked in, who lived a careless life, not concerned about faith or church, and then, at the end of their life, they have a "*come to Jesus*" moment and ... here they are.

Of course, everyone's happy they've come around; they "saw the light." But, will they really have equal reward? That's not really fair!

Or, like the story of Jonah from our Old Testament reading. Jonah was well aware of the atrocities the Ninevites were known for. They were mean, they had committed horrible acts against people.

When God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to the citizens in that great, huge city and to tell them to repent or they would be destroyed, Jonah ran the other way.

I would have too. I would be afraid to show up in that place and speak a word against them. I would fear for my life, as I'm sure Jonah did.

But after ending up in the belly of a whale, Jonah agreed to do what God told him to do, if God would just get him out of that smelly mess. Of course, the other part of Jonah's resistance was that he knew if those evil Ninevites did repent, God would be merciful and forgive them, which of course, in Jonah's opinion, they did not deserve.

And we know that that is exactly what happened. They heard the word of the Lord, they felt sorrow for what they had done and they repented. And yes, the Lord forgave them all and did not punish them.

And it ticked Jonah off royally. He was fed up. He just wanted to sit down and die. Jonah was like us – he was the faithful person, self-righteous, and here was God, treating those sinners with the same grace he showed Jonah. Jonah says, "I knew it! I knew you would be merciful!"

I guess our view depends on our place in the story. Maybe we feel differently if we are the poor instead of the privileged, or if we are the hard workers who have been around forever instead of a newcomer.

Or if we are the Ninevites, not deserving forgiveness but grateful for a second chance. (Or as God described them to Jonah – "not knowing their right hand from their left." In other words, sometimes God's children are just a little bit ignorant.)

You know what I suspect? I have a feeling that even those (in our story in Matthew) waiting for their pay, who are at the front of the line – who haven't really been around all that long, or who haven't done that much – probably expect God to be like we all think God is – just, and fair. We get what we deserve, right?

Except – that isn't how God is, according to Jesus! This parable about the kingdom of heaven, as is the story of Jonah in Nineveh, is really good news for us all!

These stories tell about God who is full of compassion and who loves to pour out grace on God's children regardless of what they have done – or – have not done. This is God who is ready to forgive, ready to fling wide the doors to the kingdom for all to come in.

Like the shepherd rejoicing over the one lost sheep; God welcomes and rejoices greatly in the latecomers coming; so much so that they get to be first in line.

The landowner asked, “Are you envious because I am generous?”

And if we are honest, we would all answer “Yes, Lord. Sometimes we are. Sometimes we want to be first – to be the first in your kingdom; the first in line; the first to receive your goodness and mercy. Forgive us, because we are like children, envious of those who get ahead of us.”

Yet, the truth is, we have all been in both places, I think. At least, I believe most of us have. At least, speaking for myself, I know I have.

Like the oldest child who felt I was worked harder than the others, I have felt a sense of privilege – like I should be first; like I deserved more because I worked harder, I did more.

But, I’ve also known the sense of not deserving the love I longed for; of being in a place of desolation after things went wrong; a sense of never being able to make it up; never thinking I could be forgiven.

Yet, the amazing grace comes – not because we have done anything to deserve it, but simply and amazingly because God wants to give it.

Truth is, if any one of us had to earn God’s grace – well, it wouldn’t be grace, first of all – but we also would never be able to get there. None of us are quite that good.

That’s grace! We can’t earn it. We don’t really deserve it. But ... we get it anyway. It’s a free gift. A gift of sheer love and generosity!

This is a model for all of us who follow Jesus; a model for us who are created in the image of God. We sometimes need to have our vision adjusted so that we look at things differently; so that we treat people as God does; so that we will be the generous people of God who practice God’s radical hospitality.

The kingdom of heaven is like this: “the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Aren’t you so thankful God is generous with us? Aren’t you grateful that God doesn’t look at justice and what’s fair the way we humans do?

Because sometimes we might be the ones who feel slighted, but I feel certain that every one of us will have a time when we are very thankful for grace – because we will realize don’t deserve it.

Praise the Lord for the unfairness of God!

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