It’s Not Fair!
Matthew 20: 1-16

It’s not fair! Oh, how many times have we heard that? How many times have we said that? The universal parental response is, “Well, life’s not fair.” Or at least, that is what my parents told me – and what I told my own children. Life is not fair. We all know that, and none of us need long, drawn-out explanations. It is painfully obvious that there are people who have more money than they could ever possibly use while others are homeless and starving. Sometimes it certainly appears that evil does prevail. Then there are those who are successes by the standards of the world – well-known, emulated, wealthy – and we have no idea what it is they have done or continue to do to deserve such reputations. No, life is decidedly not fair. But we would hope that God would be fair. Yet according to Jesus’ parable in the gospel of Matthew, if God is ‘fair’, then God must be operating on a very different definition of that term.

A landowner hired day laborers to work in his vineyard. It must have been a very large vineyard, laden with grapes, because he kept hiring people all day long – from dawn to dusk. When it came time to disburse payment for the day’s work, everyone received their wages – the same amount for every single one of them. The same! Whether the worker was there all day laboring under the hot sun or just stumbled onto the scene as the day was drawing to a close, they all received the identical amount. Now what on earth is fair about that? Who would possibly stand for such treatment? We all know that if you work harder and longer, you get paid more, right? Or at least, you should. But the landowner, for whatever reason, decided otherwise. Though it is a parable, here we are two thousand years later scratching our heads and asking, “God, what are we supposed to do with this one?”

What is ‘fair’ anyway? People getting what they deserve or have earned – would that be a correct assumption on how we view ‘fair’? It is not fair that those people worked through the cool of the morning, through the searing heat of the day, and on to the quiet of the dusk and got
paid the same amount that those who sauntered onto the scene in the late afternoon received. No, it is not fair at all. Yet, that is a dangerous assumption on our part. Nowhere does it specify how well or devotedly any of them worked. For all we know, the ones who were there all day could have taken breaks four or five times and moved very slowly as they worked their way down the rows of plants. Or the ones who began at 4 pm could have been fast and thorough as they walked through the vineyards. We don’t know. Though we want to leap at the perceived injustice in the pay scale, in reality, we know very little about the workers, the quality or the quantity of their work, their track records, their situations. We simply do not know. Yet that is our focus when we study this parable, isn’t it? We worry that if God is really like that, we might get less than someone who just recently came to believe or did not work as hard as we have. In the eyes of God, someone who, on their deathbed began to accept God, is going to have just as cushy a spot in heaven as I have, who has been in church all my life? Well, that is not fair!

And so it goes. We spiral off into the web of perceived injustices and slights, of rewards unfairly given out, of punishments avoided, and we get lost. We look at others and resent what they have and are; we look at ourselves and feel we deserve more. We wallow in the unfairness of it all. Yet I wonder, is this parable about the decidedly skewed pay scale and the quality and quantity of the work, or is it about the landowner and his generosity? Is this parable about us, or is it about God? A God who is generous beyond our comprehension, whose grace goes beyond all expectations, who constantly surprises us. Maybe, just maybe, we should be looking at God and God’s nature rather than paying so much attention to the plight of those workers.

Many centuries before the time of Jesus, God sent the judge Samuel out to seek the next king of Israel. Jesse of Bethlehem had many sons, all of them prime candidates for the position. He set up a ‘show and tell’ for Samuel, parading each of the boys in front of the esteemed judge. They were all good-looking and strong, very much ‘king’ material. Yet none of
the seven struck a chord with Samuel. Regardless of how they appeared, God seemed to have someone else in mind. There was one left, the youngest, and therefore the least likely, who had been relegated to tending the sheep, a not pleasant, almost insulting, and definitely not kingly task. God told Samuel, “...the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart.”¹ Thus, David, the youngest of the family, a lowly shepherd, the least likely, became the greatest king of all Israel. That was not fair to those older sons who, by all standards, should have been the obvious choice. God certainly has strange ways.

What is ‘fair’? I honestly don’t know. We really cannot define the concept by examining the text. They all received the same – was that fair? God certainly seemed to feel that is what was required. For years, decades, centuries, people have talked of justice. What is just? What is fair? So we attempt to enact rules and laws defining and shaping fair. Sometimes they actually do help. But ‘fair’ through the eyes of humans can certainly become warped. ‘Fair’ is separate, but of course, equal schools. ‘Fair’ is laws ‘protecting’ the fairer sex from the burden of having to think to vote. ‘Fair’ is seeking vengeance when we are wronged. Determining ‘fair’ puts us squarely on the horns of a dilemma, with neither horn being very comfortable.

Perhaps then we should shift our focus from the fairness, or unfairness, of the wages divvied out, to the generosity of the landowner, from the burden of meting out justice to living out the graciousness of God, to treasuring each day as a gift from God. I am not advocating an overthrow of our judicial system and eradicating all laws! Nor am I, in any way shape or form, saying we should not work for justice in this world. But instead, we should look to God for the pattern of justice and fairness – in all of life. All that we have and are is a gift from God, not of our own making. We cannot earn God’s love and grace. There is nothing we can do to

¹ I Samuel 16: 7, NRSV
‘deserve’ God’s goodness. But God loves us regardless – wherever we are, whatever we have done. Then God offers us a new way to live, to fully become who we were created to be. God does not protect us from consequences, God does not ignore our failings at living with grace and justice. But God loves us, God is with us, and God believes that we can be more than we are.

Perhaps that is the true essence of ‘fair’, of being ‘just’ – not in obsessing about the fairness of who has this and that and the other but in being generous and gracious and just as God has been with us. “Or are you envious because I am generous?” That was the question directed toward the grumbling workers. Literally, ‘is your eye evil because I am good?’ Justice is important, very important. It is what enables equality to be lived out in this world, it is what shields the innocents and less powerful, it is what protects us from the evil forces around us. But justice as strictly justice, a tallying of who did what and the penalty that should be levied, does not stand alone in the eyes of God. Justice always walks hand in hand with love, and that is where relationships, our relationships with each other and with God, get so complicated.

What if God were to keep a balance sheet of what we have done and not done over and against our more valiant efforts? Where would we stand? What if we were to do that in our relationships with one another? I know every single one of us have experienced this, too. You know the interactions - last week he did not take out the garbage like he said he would or she said that she would make my favorite meal and didn’t. Or the deeper wounds – do you know what that person did to me? And you want me to just let him get away with it? Oh, justice can be so very difficult, because there are times when I know I certainly have ideas about what justice should be! But it is so hard to keep it all straight, to keep all the misdeeds, slights, and hurts lined up, to decide what the appropriate action should be. Justice alone, especially when

2 Matthew 20: 15b, NRSV
it is our justice, can become a tangled web. But when love is drawn into the net, when love becomes the net, then we learn what it means to be the kingdom of heaven, the home of God’s loving generosity, not what we think is fair.

This is neither a story of just labor practices nor of workers laboring for fair wages. This parable is all about God and the eyes through which God sees this world, the eyes through which we are to strive to see the world. It’s a reversal of what we would expect. God looks at those who failed to make the first hiring cut, or who overslept that morning, or who had an emergency on their way to the marketplace, or who did not have transportation, and levels out the playing field, so that all experience the landowner’s generosity in opening up the vineyards. God is like that – favoring the poor, the weak, the ill, the rejected. No, it does not make sense, nor does it seem to be a wise way to build an effective management team.

This parable began with the kingdom. “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” The kingdom of heaven is not like the vineyards that perhaps might be burgeoning with harvest or not. The kingdom of heaven is not like the workers who labor differing hours and in differing ways. The kingdom of heaven is not like the manager who was, no doubt, confused about the seemingly unwise actions of his boss. The kingdom of heaven is like the landowner – always seeking to bring people into the vineyard, looking beyond the standards of the world, generous in ways we can never comprehend. The kingdom of heaven – that is what God has created and is shaping us to be. A people of justice, yes, but a justice shaped by a generous love that reaches far and wide to all the world.

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Matthew 20: 1, NRSV