

Rev. Shannon J Kershner
September 21, 2008
21st Sunday – Ordinary Time, Year A
Matthew 20:1-16

“It’s Not Fair! I Know...”

A week ago Saturday, at our Love and Logic© Parenting seminar, Dr. Jim Fay tried to give us tips on how to effectively parent our kids. Since we have children out in this congregation this morning, including my own daughter, I won’t tell you too many of them right now. I don’t want to let them in all of our parenting secrets. But I will share one tip with you: Dr. Fay talked about an effective way to handle the “It’s not fair” debate. When you are in the middle of an argument or “discussion” with your kid and she or he launches the “it’s not fair” bomb, you are supposed to smile, look at your child in the eyes and say “I know.”

Now, I am having to practice that “I know” on a regular basis. Because frankly, my first tendency is to respond the way my own parents responded; to respond the way parents have responded for generations. When your child says, “It’s not fair,” we all say in response - Come on now, say it with me “No one said that life is fair.” That is what I heard my parents say. That is what they heard their parents say. “No one said that life is fair.” It rolls so easily off of the tongue, doesn’t it. Almost as easily as the child rolls his eyes when he hears you say it!

But you know what? I am not sure we really believe it when we say it, even if it is our conditioned response. I think that whether we admit it or not, we all expect that life will be fair, don’t we. We all expect that if we work hard, we will reap the reward. If we study hard enough, we will get A’s. If we work hard enough, we will get the bonus or the raise. If we pray hard enough, God will do exactly what we want. If we are good people, life will be the way it is supposed to be. If we believe the right things, act the right way, and work hard at our faith, God will reward us for our righteousness.

Now when the early workers first came, they thought they would receive more (than the late workers); 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."

This sense of right and wrong, of what is fair and what’s not, is why some of us are disturbed by this parable. More than likely, when we hear this parable, we identify with the early workers. We are the ones who got up with the sun, strapped on our work boots, and were ready for the landowner at the first shift. And after working all day long in the hot Texas summer sun, we, too, are the ones who might have gotten frustrated when we realized that the landowner paid us the exact same amount he paid the workers who only did one hour’s worth of work. “It is not fair,” we might have protested, “You have made them equal to us.”

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 out into his vineyard.

A new attorney works day and night for a solid month. He works 80 hours a week. He leaves his home in the mornings before his kids get up. He gets home in the evenings after they have already gone to sleep. He puts in more time than anyone else that month. His colleague down the hall does not follow the same schedule. Actually, she ends up only working for around 50 hours a week, just enough to get by. But the firm has a good month and the partners decide to award bonuses to all the Associates. They throw a dinner party and hand out all the envelopes. Well, the new attorneys all open them and then slyly compare checks trying to act like they are not comparing. And the exhausted lawyer quickly realizes that everyone received the same exact bonus check. His 50 hour/week colleague was rewarded the same as he was. He is beyond frustrated. "It is not fair," he protests to himself, "You have made her equal to me."

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Everyone in the tenth grade class was assigned a history project and given one month to complete it. A girl in the class takes this project very seriously. She wants to be ranked in the top five going into her junior year. She spends all her free time in the school library, researching her topic. She arrives early in the mornings, before school begins, to do a little work. And she stays as late as she can in the afternoons to do a little more. She takes lots of notes and even enlists her parents to check what she is doing. As the month goes on, she is very proud of herself, and rightfully so. She is learning a lot and feels good that she is doing her very best.

One day at lunch, as she visits with some of her friends, she discovers that many of them are blowing off the project. They are planning on simply copying some stuff off the internet and turning it in. They had no desire to do the kind of work that she was doing. They would much rather play Nintendo Wii or just hang out rather than spend any time in the school library. The girl internally shakes her head. She cannot believe they are not taking it more seriously.

The morning the project is due, the girl places her report on the teacher's desk. It is typewritten and looks immaculate. Many of the other reports are written sloppily in pencil, scribbled out on notebook paper. She feels good about how much better her report looks than everyone else's. The teacher gathers them all up and makes an announcement to the class. "I am so proud of all of you for your work. You learned a lot and got it done. I have decided to give all of you an 'A'". The girl is furious! "It is not fair," she protests, "You have made them equal to me."

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 who were hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first workers 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.'

We understand the protests of the first workers, the new attorney, and the girl from the 10th grade history class. In our world of "you get what you deserve," we work hard to deserve a lot. Equal

pay for equal work, not just equal pay period. I mean, can you imagine a world in which a doctor, a lawyer, a preacher and a professional received just a living wage for the day, the same pay as a paper deliverer, a MacDonalD's cashier, or a cleaning woman. It is almost unthinkable. As New Testament professor Stan Saunders writes, "we would rather preserve some sense of difference, some privilege so that we can tell ourselves that we are more secure, harder working, and more righteous than others around us."ⁱ

More righteous. For it is not just about economics in this parable. It is not just about the fact that the landowner adopted a payment plan that equalized everyone. For an underlying issue is that we define ourselves by what we think we are worth. We may tell our kids that no one said life was fair, but we tell ourselves that we should get what we deserve. And this kind of a merit system bleeds into our faith, even though we don't want to see it.

In the Reformed Presbyterian tradition, we speak often of justification by grace and not works. I taught that theological principle in the Inquirers class this morning. And I do think that most of us really want to believe and embody that salvation is all up to God and God's grace, rather than on anything we can or cannot do. But I also think that when the rubber hits the road, though, most of us still have a little voice that lives deep in our soul who preaches to us on a regular basis that our believing matters just as much as God's grace. Our works, what we do, may not get us saved, perhaps, **but** what we do is at least just as important as God's grace.

If we are saved, if we are set free by God, then at least a small part of our salvation must be because we've earned it. We've gotten up early on Sundays, dressed up, gone to Sunday School and church. We've volunteered at Stewpot, sang in the church choir, taught Vacation Bible School and served on the Synod Youth Workshop Planning Team. We've put in our time at the Christian time clock. We deserve God's goodness and God's grace. We know we are not perfect, but we sure try hard. Now for the rest of the bunch, those who spend Sunday mornings sipping coffee and reading the paper; or taking their kids all over creation for sporting events; or sleeping in and worshipping at the church of the Holy Mattress; well, those who show up for just one hour's worth of work will get what they deserve in the end.

A friend of mine was visiting with a Pastoral Nominating Committee from a new church. The conversation had been going well, but it suddenly took a turn. One member of the PNC was very concerned that my friend was starting to sound like he might just think that it is a possibility that God will receive all people into heaven. "Wait just a minute," the PNC member interrupted. "Do you mean to tell me that you believe God might just take everybody to heaven—even those who do not deserve it? Those who have not been baptized? Those who have not professed Jesus as Lord and Savior? Those who do not go to church and who have no intention of ever going to church? Is that what you, a Presbyterian minister, are telling us?"

My friend swallowed hard and replied, "Well, I don't want to tell God what God has to do, but I do believe that in Jesus Christ we have good hope for all people." The PNC member was very upset by this answer. You could just hear the words in her head. "That is not fair. You are making those people equal to me." My friend saw those words in her face and decided that at this point, he might as well let it all theologically hang out. "May I ask you a question," he said

to her. She shrugged her shoulders. “How many people will need to be in Hell before you will feel safe?” Needless to say, my friend did not receive the call to serve that church.

But we do need to ask ourselves a similar question, don’t we? Why is it that that the early workers, the mumbler, cannot handle the incredible kindness that puts the latecomers on par with them? For we know that it is not that the early workers are really against **grace**, right? So maybe they are only against that kind of immense grace shown to others and what that implies.ⁱⁱ For that kind of overwhelming and undeserved grace implies that all of our neat categories—of what is fair and unfair, what is right and wrong, who is deserving and who is not—all those neat categories just may not be the way God operates. Can you imagine? It just may be that the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God’s grace is so **utterly unlike** the kingdoms of this world, of our world, that all bets, and all tidy calculations of merit and means, are off.ⁱⁱⁱ That’s crazy, isn’t it? It is shocking. It is more than a tad disturbing to all of us early workers.

But perhaps that is simply the way God is. Perhaps God operates in a way that is not **fair**, but is **generous**. Perhaps God operates in a way where all people, all sinners, are equally deserving of God’s goodness and God’s graciousness, simply because they are God’s children. Period.

Furthermore, consider this. Consider how it must have felt to be those last workers who were hired that day. They were probably scared stiff. For one reason or another, no one had wanted them all day long. No one had hired them all day long. But they, like everyone else, had to figure out a way to survive, to feed their families, to make it another few days. And after they worked only one hour, they fully expected to be paid for only one hour. So when that landowner gave them an entire day’s wages, they were overcome by his generosity and grace. They could barely say “thank you.” Can you imagine what that was like for them? For when you are in **that** group, frankly, God’s grace is the only thing that keeps you going. God’s grace is the only thing to which you can cling. God’s grace and incredible generosity are your only hopes.

And as they counted and recounted their wage, overwhelmed by such gracious generosity, a few of them spoke up. “Goodness, this sure is not fair,” they said quietly. “You have made us equal with them. Bless You, O Lord. We are yours.”

ⁱ Saunders, Stan and Charles Campbell. The Word on the Street. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. p. 121.

ⁱⁱ Brueggeman et. al. Texts for Preaching, Year A.

ⁱⁱⁱ Van Harn, Roger, editor. The Lectionary Commentary-The Gospels. page 112.