

“What Is Fair?”
Matthew 20:1-16

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Pastor Robert De Moor tells the following story:

Back in Ontario when the apples ripened, Mom would sit all seven of us down, Dad included, with pans and paring knives until the mountain of fruit was reduced to neat rows of filled canning jars. She never bothered keeping track of how many we did, though the younger ones undoubtedly proved more of a nuisance than a help: cut fingers, squabbles over who got which pan, apple core fights. But when the job was done, the reward for everyone was the same: the largest chocolate dipped cone money could buy.

A nitpicker might argue it wasn't quite fair since the older ones, actually peeled apples. But I can't remember anyone complaining about it. A family understands it operates under a different set of norms than a courtroom. In fact, when the store ran out of ice cream and my younger brother had to make do with a Popsicle, we felt sorry for him despite his lack of productivity (he'd eaten all the apples he'd peeled that day—both of them). God wants all his children to enjoy the complete fullness of eternal life. No true child of God wants it any other way.

This acceptance without judgment was shown by Jesus on many occasions, and also earned him much criticism from those who separated the righteous from the sinners - and always saw themselves as the righteous. Jesus didn't wait for a divine conversion, or even until the sinner became a follower, but met people where they were, and on their terms. Tax collectors, prostitutes, Gentiles, lepers—the dregs of society - all were accepted by Jesus. He ate with them; he drank with them; he even invited himself to stay with them. Most of all—he loved them in a way that only their creator could love them.

In the parable told by Jesus this morning, a landowner hired a group of laborers to work a twelve-hour day at the usual rate of pay. That much was fair. Everybody knew up front what was expected of them, and what they would receive for their efforts. The landowner then realized if he wanted to accomplish what needed to be accomplished, he would have to hire more workers. Now, the first group of workers had been hired about 6 a.m. About 9 a.m., when that first group had already put in three hours of work, the landowner hired another group. About noon, he hired more workers. About 3 p.m., he hired more. And at 5 p.m., even more. The landowner said to all these later workers, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right" (Matthew 20:4). Nothing unusual there. They all expected to be paid for the time that they put in, and the landowner promised these later hires only that he would be fair.

However, what the landowner considered fair was much different than what those hired first considered to be fair. Those hired at five expected to get one hour's pay. Those hired at noon, a half-day's pay, and so on. That's all he had to do to be "fair," in our understanding, but that isn't what happened.

When the group that had worked only an hour was paid first, he was more than fair. A lot more. They got a whole day's pay! Twelve times more than they had earned! The same for those who

had worked three hours and six hours and nine hours. They also received a full day's pay. And then the paymaster got to those who had worked all day; to those who had "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Matthew 20:12), to those who had worked twelve full hours, to those who were expecting a bonus. "They thought they would receive more" (Matthew 20:10). After all, fair's fair! I mean, if someone who works only an hour gets a full day's pay, than we should at least get double that, right? Well—not exactly.

They all got the same. One day's pay for one day. Exactly what they were promised, and exactly what they had agreed to accept. Twelve hours earlier, those who worked the whole day had considered "the usual daily wage" (Matthew 20:2) to be fair - and were glad to get it. But now, at the end of the day? "Not fair!" they said. And that is exactly Jesus' point. God isn't about being fair. God is about being far more than fair. God is about grace.

The story is saying that God's grace is not something that any of us can earn. We can't work our way to heaven. When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay—that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for performance - that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for long service or high achievements—that is an award. But when a person isn't capable of earning a wage, is unable to win a prize, and deserves no award - yet receives such a gift anyway—that is the grace of God.

A man dies and goes to heaven. Of course, St. Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in." Okay, " the man says, "I was married to the same women for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart." "That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth three points." "Three points?"

He says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service." Terrific!" say's St. Peter. "That's certainly worth a point." "One point? Well I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans." Fantastic, that's good for two more points," he says. "Two points!"

The man cries. "At this rate, the only way to get into heaven is by the grace of God!" St. Peter smiled. "There's your 100 points! Come on in!"

Jesus tells us that, "The last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16). Wait, that's not fair! I have worked very hard to be first. Well, maybe it is really more than fair—it is grace.

Think of it this way. If the first are last, and the last are first, is Jesus saying that the "first" lose, and the "last" win? Our logic tells us that if someone wins, then someone must lose. That may be the way it is in our society, but that is not the way it is in God's kingdom. Remember, the vineyard workers, from the first to the last, were each given what was fair. Instead of win-lose, the kingdom of heaven is win-win. And that's more than fair.

There is an old rabbinic parable about a farmer who had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and he taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the

chores of the farm and when the father died, they had found their working together so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. Each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had together produced. Across the years, the elder brother never married, but stayed an old bachelor. The younger brother did marry and had eight wonderful children.

Some years later, when they were having a wonderful harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of this harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night, when he is asleep, I'll take some of what I have put in my barn and I'll slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children."

At the very time the older brother was thinking that, the younger brother was thinking to himself, "God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn't been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He's much too fair. He'll never renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night, when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over into his barn for his retirement."

And so one night when the moon was full, as you have probably already anticipated, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. The old rabbi said that [though] there wasn't a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God weeping for joy because two of his children had gotten the point.

Do we get the point? Is our generosity—with our time, with our love, with our gifts—just enough, by human standards—or is it abundantly overflowing—which is God's standard?

Generosity is one of the deepest characteristic of the holy. It is because we are made in God's image that being generous, or being more than fair to those around us, is the secret to our joy as well. AMEN