

IS GOD FAIR?
MATTHEW 20:1-16
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If we wanted to start things out right today, I'd challenge you to some lively discussion this morning. I would break you into three groups. The group on my left would discuss the pros and cons to raising the minimum wage, the group in the middle section would discuss the Senate's vote last week blocking the Paycheck Fairness Act (also known as the equal pay bill), and the group to my right would huddle up and take turns sharing personal information of monthly income, monthly labor demands, monthly household expenses and the income disparity in the city of New Orleans.

Sounds like a fun way to spend a Sunday morning, right? Would there be any of us left in the room at the end of the hour? Would the conversations damage our relationships? Is it all too personal? Polite conversation doesn't include religion, politics, or money, after all. Yet the Gospel text before us initially invites us to examine our experience with and attachment to all three.

We have strongly held opinions and beliefs about how things should be and how things should be done. We have quietly held hopes about how we rate, where we rank, and how we and others are assigned value both by our culture and by our God.

Once again, we have the disciple Peter to ask our questions for us. Peter takes a lot of hits in Matthew. He's the one who asked last week, "How serious are you about this forgiveness thing, Jesus? How many times do I have to forgive before I can finally be righteously indignant or perpetually resentful?"

Prior to today's parable, Peter asks Jesus, "We disciples have been faithful to you. What do we get out of it? We left everything behind, we've done all the things you've asked. What's the payoff here?"

And in Jesus' typical teaching style, he responds to this question of earning God's favor or earning God's best with a story.

Imagine there's a man who owns a great, big farm out past the edge of town, and it's time to harvest everything. The tomatoes are fresh and ripe; so heavy they almost reach down to the ground. The squash leaves are twice the size of your head, and their bounty is hidden beneath their winding vines. Okra and green beans and eggplant and

squash. Everything you can imagine is in need of picking, and the garden plots continue as far as the eye can see in every direction. No bores or slugs, no blossom end rot to be seen. The land is lush, healthy, thriving. There will be nothing but beautiful Summer produce to pluck, cut, pick, and gather.

It's more than the poor guy can manage buy himself with his current staff, so the man who owns this farm heads into town to the corner where the day laborers wait to be hired. He invites them to join him in his work and promises to pay them fairly, and follow him they do. But there's still more to be picked than this crew can handle, so he goes back looking for a second shift. and he goes back four more times after that. He keeps looking for anyone who is willing to join in, and he promises to pay them all.

Then when the day is done and they've picked bushels and bags, when the snap beans and purple hull peas and zucchini and cucumbers are all stacked around them, the man who owns the farm tells the head of his regular staff to pay the day laborers \$100 each. Start with the ones who came in at 5, then the crew that started at 3, then the half-day workers, the folks who arrived at 9, and lastly, pay the ones who came in early in the morning.

This makes no sense to us, right? It made no sense to Peter. It made no sense to anyone listening to Jesus because this is not how business gets done. It was even more absurd in Jesus' time than it is to us now as no landowner would ever behave this way.

Peter wants to know what he's going to GET out of following Jesus so faithfully. He thinks of the rich young man who came to Jesus with questions about what it means to have eternal life. Jesus told him to sell everything and live in Jesus' simple way. The young man is heart broken and unwilling to take such a risk, so he walked away sad. Peter looked back at that guy and realized he and the other disciples had been willing to walk away from their own livelihoods to be with Jesus. Surely that meant he and the others were better than the young man. He tried that logic out on Jesus, and it didn't fly. "This isn't that sort of Kingdom, Jesus says with this parable. You don't earn your way to the top. There is no top," writes Rachel Held Evans.

That doesn't fall easily on our American ears. We're told all of our lives: You work hard, you keep your nose to the grindstone, you pull yourself up by your bootstraps, and you get rewarded for it. Forget the fact that all of that is false for a whole lot of people in this world, it is most certainly not the way of the kingdom of God. So if this is the only way we have known, then like Peter, we need to be taught how God's way is different.

The kingdom of God is like a man who owns a farm and hires any workers who will join him. That means the strong ones early in the morning and the leftover ones that no

one else wants to use: the weak ones, the lazy ones, the ones who showed up late, the desperate ones, the tired ones, the sick ones, the ones who never get picked.

When we think we're on the right side, the chosen side, the better side and those others out there are on the wrong side, the heretical side, the lost side, our response is often the same as Peter's. "I earned this. I deserve this. I am so much better than those people." And the "this" in our thinking changes. I earned the blessings in my life. I earned a place at God's banquet table. I earned my privilege. I earned God's grace. Whatever the "this" is, our thinking is as backwards as Peter's.

We forget the truth of our story just as Peter has forgotten his story. You may remember the teaching that rabbis in the first-century were sought out by the best-of-the-best students who pursued rabbis and requested to be their disciples. If Jesus was part of that system, then Jesus went out of his way to NOT participate in its rules. He didn't want the best-of-the-best who got worship right and theology right and Hebrew right. He wanted the ones who gave up a long time ago, who didn't show up for Temple, who were interesting and quirky and smart at things BEYOND being good rabbis.

In that very first draft pick, Jesus found fishermen, a tax collector, and who knows what else. In the stories about people chosen later, we know what the list is like: the morally and physically crooked, the mentally ill and emotionally scarred, the curious and willing, the ones whose hearts and bodies ached for a long time. Jesus drew them in, healed them, blessed them, ate with them. Some of them joined his traveling crew and others were sent back to be a blessing in their hometowns.

In the same way, the landowner in today's parable doesn't follow protocol. The manager who paid the workers at the end of the day would have also been responsible for hiring the best workers available, and he surely would have only hired at the earliest hour of the day. And had that manager been irresponsible with wages, a landowner would have been furious about it. But THIS landowner not only wants to extend the invitation himself, but he keeps heading back out to look for more people to join him in the work to be done.

We know in our heads that Jesus was more generous than we could ever hope to be, but we have to be told again because we don't want to believe that we too are called to this extravagant generosity. It is already enough for us to fathom that God is endlessly gracious with all people. Must we really be gracious, too?

We're perpetually the older brother in the story of the compassionate father and the prodigal son. We're annoyed with those who don't take God SERIOUSLY like we do. We sulk in the shadows as we watch a new party break out with God dancing in the

middle of the celebrating crowd. We become fearful when God's grace moves around. It seems to grow. And yet we fear there won't be enough to cover us all.

Parents, you know how this goes. You know the our whining voices sound when we begin sulking: But Mom, it's not FAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIRRRRRR. She got it first. He got to use it longer. She already had two and I only get one. It's not FAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIRRRRRR.

"But God isn't fair," writes Rachel Held Evans, "God is irrationally and irresponsibly generous. His mercies are infinite, offensive, new every morning."¹

Two of the best questions to ask about scripture, particularly when we do not quite understand what is going on or what is being communicated, are: 1) what does this text say about who God is? 2) what does this text say about humanity in relation to God?

The primary focus of this parable is an answer to the first question: who is God? what is God like? how does God work in the world?

Emerson Powery notes how this "parable highlights the generosity of God. As the ultimate 'landowner,' God will use what has always belonged to the Creator for the good of all even if humans fail to view the world through God's eyes. In Jesus earlier words: God's perfection is exemplified in God's rain on the just and the unjust (cf. 5:48). The landowner's question in the parable is Jesus' punchline for the story: 'Are you envious because I am generous?'"²

Are we envious because God is generous? Do we worry God's blessings will run out? These are questions rooted in anxiety. We are hard-wired to fear scarcity. There won't be enough food, there won't be enough jobs, there won't be enough room. And both the reality of and fear of scarcity breed competition. If you and I both want that one thing, then I have to beat you to it. The job, the money, the free meal, the last open seat. But like a friend of writer Carolyn Brown noted, "God's love is not like a pie that leaves less for me every time God gives someone else a slice. [God's love is] more like a joke that gets funnier every time another person joins the laughing."³

To the second question, what does the text say about humanity in our relation to God, there is a lesson for us in today's parable in the landowner's invitation. Our need to

¹ <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lectionary-workers-vineyard-landowner>

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2157

³ <http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2014/09/year-proper-20-25th-sunday-in-ordinary.html>

categorize and assign value to people, our fear that there isn't enough to go around for everyone, our hidden beliefs that some people are more valuable than us while others are less valuable than us: all of those thoughts, feelings, and assumptions come out of the marketplace. Remember, the marketplace is where the landowner went to invite people waiting there to be hired. He called them out of one economy and took them away to another economy. He calls to them and invites them to his vineyard. There's enough for everyone there. The landowner has endless resources and is endlessly generous. Even the least desirable, least capable, least attractive, least able to return an act of generosity in kind is welcomed at the last hour into the landowner's care.

So if his generosity is upsetting to us, as it was to Peter, that is because we are still sitting in the marketplace as we scratch our heads.

God is inviting you to another way. Another way of seeing the world. Another way of living without constant fear. Another way of supporting and loving each other. Another way of being the church. God's kingdom is upside down and doesn't make sense to us sometimes. Yet we are invited to try to get the punchline, dance at the party, set another place at the banquet table, join in the harvest, and take great delight when the leftover, the outcast, the forgotten are the ones who come sit down beside us.

Because "God is irrationally and irresponsibly generous. [God's] mercies are infinite, offensive, new every morning." This is good news, my friends. God is inviting us to walk in the ways of this kingdom.