

9-24-17 Sermon: “That’s Not Fair!” – Matthew 21:1-16

As some of you know, I am the oldest of three children. I have two younger brothers: Jim, who’s about two and a half years young than me, and Jack, who is about two and a half years younger than Jim. And yes, you heard that right: Ginna, Jim, and Jack.

My brothers and I have remained close to one another as we’ve become adults. And I often credit the strength of our adult relationships to the fact that we fought – *a lot* – when we were kids. As three children all born within five years of one another, we found plenty of things to fight about. And usually, those fights started and ended with the same three words, “That’s. Not. Fair.”

As the oldest child, I tended to be very quick to point out these devastating injustices taking place under our roof. For example, my youngest brother, Jack, got the pet lizard he’d been asking for just about the same time I got my long-awaited pet cat. But you see, that wasn’t fair, because I had been asking for a cat much longer than he’d been asking for a lizard based on the sheer fact that I’d been alive longer than he had. I was thrilled to finally have a cat – and to be honest, fairly intrigued by the lizard as well – but Jack didn’t have to wait as long as I did. And well, that’s not fair!

I imagine those of you who grew up with siblings or who have been the parents of siblings can fill in the rest. Jim’s turn on the swing lasted 3 minutes longer than mine – that’s not fair! Jack had his first sleepover when he was five; I had to wait until I was six – that’s not fair! And of course, the ultimate injustice: they both got a brother, but I never got *any* sisters. That’s. Not. Fair.

I feel some of those childhood instincts creeping back up when I hear the parable Jesus tells in this morning’s Gospel reading. Do you? For most people, there is something about this parable that feels fundamentally unfair. Some of these laborers have worked twelve long hours, breaking their backs under the scorching heat of the Palestinian sun, and others showed up in the cool of the evening and hardly worked an hour. And yet they all get paid the same amount. I don’t know about you, but I can feel my nine-year-old self getting worked up with her usual righteous indignation. In fact, I can feel my 29-year-old self getting a little worked up. What gives, Jesus? Ever heard of “equal pay for equal work?”

There is something about this parable that offends our sensibilities, that troubles our innate understanding of how things should work. Which is, of course, precisely why Jesus tells it. As in most of his parables, Jesus telling this story to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, the world as God intends it. And, as is usually this case, the Kingdom of Heaven looks quite different from our current Kingdom. It’s the Kingdom of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor, blessed are they who mourn, blessed are the meek.” Blessed are those who come late to the vineyard, for they shall be paid in full.

As I’ve wrestled with this parable this week, I’ve come to believe that what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples – what Jesus is trying to teach us – is that God’s definition of what is fair looks a little bit different from our definition – at least, on the surface. That God’s understanding runs a little deeper than ours. That in those places where we might seek equality, God seeks something a little more complicated: Justice.

I’ve seen a cartoon going around on social media that illustrates this far better visually than I could with words. And so, I’m going to ask Mark and Ivan to come up and help me “act out” this cartoon for y’all.

In the cartoon, there are three children all trying to see over a fence to watch a baseball game. And like Mark, Ivan, and myself, each child is of a rather different height. In the first

picture, each one is standing on a small box to look over the fence. This picture is labeled “equality”, because we all get the same thing. But, as you can see, while Mark can see over the fence just fine, I’m barely getting a glimpse, and Ivan’s got no chance of seeing what’s going on!

In the second frame of this cartoon, the tallest child is standing on the ground, the middle child stands on a small box, and the shortest child gets a big boost up to see over the fence. This second picture is labeled “justice.” The kids don’t all get the same thing, but they each get what they *need* to see over the fence and watch the baseball game.

If I understand the text, I think *this* might be what Jesus is trying to teach us in this parable. That God’s idea of justice has far less to do with tally marks of how much we’ve done or what we deserve, and far more to do with making sure that each of us has enough. That we get what we need to make it through. At the end of the day, each laborer gets paid a denarius, a day’s wages. Everyone has enough to put food on the table that night. Quite literally, every one of the laborers in the vineyard receives their daily bread.

It’s like the manna that God rained down on the Israelites in the wilderness. The original daily bread, if you will. As we heard in our reading from Exodus, when the Hebrew people went out to gather the manna, some gathered more, and some gathered less. But, they all ended up with enough. They all got what they needed.

And, as we humans do, some of the Israelites tried to outwit God, and to hoard a little extra of that manna for themselves. But the next day they awoke to find it full of worms. God’s Kingdom, God’s justice, God’s desire for God’s people, is that each of gets what we need, gets *enough*. In God’s Kingdom, there is always plenty.

The fact of the matter is, we worship a God who is outrageously, even wastefully generous. A God who, like the landowner in the parable, keeps going back out and looking for *more* people to work in his vineyard. A God who wants all of those people to take home a daily wage, regardless of whether or not we deserve it. We worship a God for whom justice is pure and simple grace.

And the thing about grace is that it’s a gift. Grace is not something that we can earn, or deserve, no matter how many hours we might labor in that vineyard. Grace is like the gift of manna, the daily bread that we could never have grown or purchased. Grace is like the forgiveness that a loved one extends to us even after we have done something we thought was unforgivable. Grace is like a meal given to us by a stranger, when we didn’t think we were going to be able to eat that night. It’s like a bill paid or contribution made from an anonymous donor. Like getting a day’s wages when we only worked one hour. Grace is that miracle of being given what we *need*, and realizing we have enough.

I think Jesus tells this parable because he *is* fully human, and he knows what we humans are like. He knows that like those first laborers who sweated all day in the vineyard, like 9-year-old Ginna keeping tabs on how many minutes my brothers got to spend on the swings, it can be easy for those of us who are thoroughly steeped in the world’s understand of what is “fair” to resent a Kingdom based on Justice and Grace.

Not when we’re on the receiving end of it, of course. When we are ones who receive the unexpected gift of grace, it comes like a cool, precious drink of water for our parched souls. When we are on the receiving end of grace, we know why it is that people sing about God’s streams of mercy, flowing down upon us; why the prophet Amos describes righteousness like waters, and justice like an ever-flowing stream.”

But we are human, after all, and sometimes, we forget. We forget what it feels like to be in need of grace, to not have enough. And perhaps we do, from time to time, find ourselves

resenting God's generosity, raising our 9-year-old fists to the sky and crying, "That's not fair!" Some days, without even realizing it, *we* try to play role of the landowner, deciding for ourselves who has worked hard and long enough for their daily bread, and who has not. We start our own little tally system of who does – and does not – deserve to have...enough.

But thanks be to God, that's not how grace works.

We can be resentful, if we want to be. We can grumble about whether or not it's fair that in God's Kingdom, the last will be first, and the shortest child gets the biggest boost. That is one option.

Or, we can simply say thank you. "Thank you, God, for the gift of daily bread, enough to make it through today. Thank you for providing it not only for me, but also for my neighbor. Thank you, God, for giving that daily bread even to my enemy. Thank you for being that kind of God."

Friends, in the end, the justice of God's grace – the Kingdom where everyone has *enough* – is not always fair. And thanks be to God for that.