

Sermon September 21, 2014

Exodus 14:10, 13-16, 21-25, 30-31 Matthew 20:1-16

“Way Beyond ‘Fair’”

The hair-styling salon was nothing fancy, and Mimi, the woman who ran it, was fair but tough. Everything was always clean, the stylists were good, and the prices were fair, and the stylist all pulled together, all helped one another out, all were glad to have a job. All around, times were tough. Layoffs were in abundance. Inflation was high. Lots of folks were having a hard time making ends meet. Christmas was coming. Greta was thankful that she'd been able to find a job at the salon. This month's rent would be paid. Then at closing that week in mid-December, Mimi called the stylists into the back room, and gave them each \$500 as a bonus. Greta was dumbfounded, since she'd never received a bonus at any other salon she'd worked for, and since she hadn't worked for Mimi quite two months. The other stylists were also surprised, but not in the same way. As soon as Greta left, they started grumbling, “Why did SHE get as much as we did? She just started working here! It's not fair.” Ron had worked there for over 2 years and didn't see why Greta had received the same money that he had. Anne--who had worked there for 8 months said nothing--a bit embarrassed, but Myrtle had been there for 8 years was ready to resign. “It isn't fair,” she moaned, “It just isn't fair!”

Life often does not seem to be fair---because it isn't. No, was it fair that hurricane Odiel did not hit the USA but decimated parts of Mexico? Is it fair that California has a terrible drought while other parts of the country deal with floods? Is it fair that one person gets bitten by a tick and contracts Lyme Disease and the next person has no lasting problems? Is it fair when an innocent child is killed by a drunken driver---and the drunken driver isn't hurt at all? Life is not fair.

How much easier it is for us to see life's unfairness when we are on the losing end than when we are the recipients of undeserved blessings. Rarely do we realize how blessed we are in life. We tend to forget to be thankful when tragedy does not befall us, when we arrive safely home, when we do not lose our jobs, when our bodies remain healthy, and that we live in a land that provides us opportunities and health care and help even when life seems hard for us. Some wise person once said, If you don't get all the things in life that you want, just consider how many things you *don't* get that you don't want! But we are creatures of comparison, we want what we want and find ourselves easily resenting another persons' blessings.

There is much trouble around us. Our nation has stepped into a no-boots-on-the-ground war, and we feel threatened by ISIS/ISIL as we have no idea when and how they may strike us; people we know are still jobless and homeless; many of you who are here deal with a shortage of money; health issues abound; relationships offer challenges and hurt. We hear of almost daily shootings, we learn of folks losing their homes to violent fires in California, we see reports of vulnerable people trying to enter our country on our southern borders, we cringe as Ebola spreads in Western Africa and as bombings continue in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the middle East. Our world shakes and struggles.

One day a woman with whom I was talking suddenly blurted out, "I wonder why God is making

so-and-so suffer so?" Her suggestion that God was behind this person's suffering brought me up short. The woman is an active Christian, who tries to live out the love of Jesus Christ for others. And she thinks that God is causing her friend to suffer.

I can imagine God's pain. God gets all the blame when things go wrong, but God rarely gets any credit the most of the times when things go well. It's as though we have automatic "negativity-seekers" built into us, perhaps similar to a missile's heat-seeking capacity. If there's something to gripe about, we quickly center in on it, and by so doing we obliterate our own sense of appreciation for what we have been given.

The two scriptures we heard today reflect this truth. The Israelites were being delivered out of slavery in Egypt, witnessing God's miraculous works on their behalf. Freedom from slavery had seemed like a great idea when they'd been slaves, but once they were faced with Pharaoh's army, or later with hunger or thirst, reality hit hard. They thought they would die. Their previous life looked better and better, and so the people complained. They could not see their deliverance as a gift, but as a threat.

In the Gospel lesson, all the laborers were blessed to have been chosen for a job for the day. In our own stubbornly recession-like time, some of us may understand very personally what a blessing any job was for those trying to survive on a day-to-day basis. Each laborer received what he had been hoping for that morning: a chance to earn a day's wage. (pause) Because of the actions of the land-owner, lots of families were fed that night.

But, alas, in Jesus' story, human nature kicked the blessing in the teeth, and made it instead a source of contention. "Why did he receive as much as I did when he only worked a quarter of the time?" "It's not fair! Don't think that I am going to work all day in that hot field for you tomorrow-I'll show up mid-afternoon." (pause)

William Willimon once wrote about how, when he was in high school, he had been told by parents and others, "When you cheat, you hurt no one but yourself." He believed this. So, when a schoolmate started approaching him every morning before class asking, "Hey, do you have your Latin homework?" Willimon would sometimes let him see his homework, thinking that the boy was hurting no one but himself. He would get what was coming to him later, Willimon thought...Just wait.

Well, along came Honors Day, when the whole school crowded into the auditorium to pay homage to the best in the class. The one who walked across the stage to claim the prize in Latin was none other than the boy who had cheated every morning! Willimon wrote: "I wanted to stand up and shout, 'Wait, there's been a mistake here! This isn't right! Remember? If you cheat, you're hurting yourself! Something's wrong; the world's got an odd way of punishing cheaters.'" Something's wrong here.. (*Pulpit Resource*, 1999 edited by fte)

Jesus' parable has traditionally been called the parable of "the Laborers in the Vineyard." But in terms of the workers, there are no surprises in the story. The people react predictably, quite in line with the experiences in the wilderness and with our own experiences today. Where two or three are gathered, there's likely to be trouble, and there are sure to be comparisons made!

The surprise in Jesus' story has nothing to do with the response of the laborers, but everything to do with the action of the owner, who provided sufficient blessing for all those who needed work that day. Commentator Bernard Brandon Scott (*Hear Then the Parable*) suggests that the land-owner wasn't particularly generous; he gave everybody the usual wage, which was only enough to support a family for one day. But the land-owner was unusual in another respect: he repeatedly went down to the village to hire workers. The boss went to town early in the day and hired workers. That should have been the end of the story. Workers were needed, sought, hired, they worked, and were paid. Fine. Had the story been that way, there would have been no surprises, no parable. But this vineyard owner kept going down to get more workers, even the ones no other farmer apparently wanted to hire, even right to the end of the day. And then he paid the workers, the last first and the first last, in full view of each other so that everybody knew what everybody else got, and everybody got the same even though some had worked a lot longer.

The story makes us want to bring an element of common sense into the situation. Wise up, land owner! Maybe there ought to be a bonus for the early workers, a promise that they will have first shot at the jobs tomorrow--*something* to let them know they were appreciated. At the very least, pay them first and let them leave before showing such generosity to the short-hour workers. Doesn't the master know that he is just inviting trouble?

But Jesus tells the story, not to make sense or to give advice about how to run a business--he is illustrating the contrast between human nature and God's nature--between fairness and grace. Jesus is showing us what God is like.

This parable doesn't feel good when it rubs against our sense of fairness and what we think is right. But it's not *supposed* to feel good. It doesn't *want* us to slip into a sense of "Yeah, I'm earning my wage with God, I've been hired and I'm working and I know what to expect." It wants to shake us up and get us riled and catch our attention so that we can notice that God's ways are *not* ours. God keeps searching for new workers way past when we would have called it a day. God is not concerned with "being fair" as much as God is with providing daily bread.

The latecomers didn't earn what they received. They didn't deserve it. But in real life, who *does* deserve the blessings that fill our days? How hard it is for those of us who are fairly comfortable to live, not with grumbling and resentful comparisons, but with appreciation and trust in the One who makes life possible and who calls us to help make life more possible for others!

A member of a former congregation told of being on a cruise once and having to share a table with a most disagreeable couple. It seemed that no matter what happened on the cruise, it was bad.

The food wasn't what it was supposed to be, the beds were too hard, the cabin too small, the weather uncooperative, the band too loud. "They made life miserable for everyone else and surely didn't get their money's worth out of the trip, for they spent all their time complaining." Later, my friend told me, he learned that this couple had been given the cruise as an anniversary present from their family---and he added—"I guess it was worth it to the family to get rid of them for awhile." (JS)

Can you imagine going on a gift cruise and being so unable to have a good time? Can you imagine going through life without even trying to enjoy the gifts God gives? But to some degree, we are all guilty of this. We go through life comparing, looking at what others have, spending our time wishing for what we don't have rather than appreciating our blessings. We are not being bombed. We are not refugees in a foreign land. Each of us has some choices.

The old song is so on-target: Count your blessings, name them one by one, count your blessings, see what God has done. Count your many blessings, name them ONE BY ONE, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done. We're so busy comparing what we have to what somebody else has that we forget to measure the blessedness of our lives.

I love the old illustration of the roofer working on the third story roof of a house. Suddenly he slipped and found himself falling toward the edge. He cried out to God, "Help me, Lord." His belt was snagged by a nail, and he did not fall. So he quickly said to God, "Never mind, God, a nail caught me." (Old story, told by many) That's us. That's what God puts up with.

Life, with all its troubles and scary times, is nevertheless a priceless gift, an opportunity for choice: to grumble and compare, to complain and seek out the negative; or to receive it as it has been offered, precious and something to be shared, a way to walk with the God who is and always will be sufficient for our needs... May the measure of God's love and mercy be our strength and our guide, now and throughout our every day. Amen.