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“It’s Not Just Fair!”

Based on Matthew 20: 1-16

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September 18, 2011

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Whenever this particular passage comes up in the lectionary, I don’t know whether I’m being blessed or cursed. I have a vivid memory of a sermon by Eugene Lowry on this passage being read to us on the first day of our preaching class in seminary as an example of how to preach on a parable. It was a wonderful sermon. So I find it as a particular challenge to preach on the same passage. And what a challenge.

This passage also reminds me of ethics class in seminary when we were asked to define “the good life”. We had three minutes to come up with our answers and I probably spent 2.5 of those minutes staring at my sheet of paper. What is the good life? It’s not an easy question to answer. Take a few moments and think about it.

What I came up with, in my three minutes was this: The good life is one in which basic material needs are met (food, shelter, sanitation), relational/emotional/spiritual needs are met (strong relationships with family, friends, and God), and pleasure needs are met (time for fun, relaxation, recreation). I don’t think this is a bad start, and it’s probably very close to what many of you would come up with if given the full three minutes. But my definition left out at least one very important aspect which I’ll be coming back to in a little bit.

This Biblical passage is usually interpreted in its spiritual context. Commentaries tell us that it’s about who will be first and who will be last in the kingdom of God. It can also be interpreted in a social context as literally being about those working and those not working, those earning a days’ wage on those not. I don’t think it’s *either* spiritual *or* social, I think it’s both.

In the book of Matthew, this story comes directly after Jesus’ conversation with the rich young man. Surely this man was living the good life. The young man was perfectly pious and had done everything according to the religious law, tradition and custom. He asked Jesus what more he needs to do to for eternal life. The only thing he still needed to do is the only thing he could not do: sell all his possessions and follow Jesus. He was sent away disappointed. Jesus said that the young man had less chance of getting into the kingdom of heaven than a camel has of getting through the eye of a needle. Peter, eager for confirmation that he would be “in”, pointed out that he and the other disciples had dropped everything to follow Jesus, what reward could they expect? The question prompts Jesus to tell this story about the kingdom of heaven.

There were these workers, day laborers, standing around waiting for work. They got to their customary spot early in the morning and waited for someone to

come hire them for the day. A landowner comes along and offers them work, saying he'd pay the going rate. Happy to be working, they leave to put in a hard day's work. A few hours later, the landowner comes back, finds some more workers and hires them, too. And the landowner repeats this a number of times throughout the day. Even as late as the end of the day, with only one hour left to work, the landowner goes out and hires some workers, promising to pay them fairly. When the end of the day comes, the landowner pays those who've only worked one hour first. *And* he pays them a full day's wage. Those who've been working all day see this and get pretty excited, anticipating they'll get paid many days' worth of pay, since they worked many hours longer. But, alas, they also get paid one day's wage, the wage they agreed to work for, a fair day's wage according to the landowner. They complain to the landowner that it's not fair that they should be paid the same as those who worked only an hour. Sending them away, the landowner says he can do whatever he wants with his money.

I must admit, like many people, this parable used to really bother me. If God is good, then God should be fair and this story Jesus tells simply is not fair. It's not fair for those who have been working all day, nine or more hours through the heat, to be paid the same wage as those who sat around all day and then only worked an hour. Until I heard Lowry's sermon in seminary, I never heard this passage explained to my satisfaction. The explanations about God's overwhelming generosity also tended to concede that those afternoon workers didn't really deserve the full day's wage, but "God does as God wills and who are we to question that?" While I would never deny that we are incapable of comprehending the mind of God, such explanations make God out to be both unfair and perhaps a little fickle, playing favorites and not only playing favorites, but favoring the least deserving over the most deserving. This just isn't fair.

As Americans, our Puritan work ethic and the American Dream are in our DNA. It doesn't matter how long you've lived here. If your ancestors came over on the Mayflower or if you risked your life to cross over the border yesterday, somewhere in your consciousness is probably the idea that if you just work hard enough, you will have the "good life". If you just work hard enough, your situation will improve. The benefit you reap will be commensurate to the work you do. This parable flies in the face of that. And that's why we don't like it. This just isn't fair.

As Jesus probably intended, most of us look at the all-day workers and see ourselves; we look at the landowner and see God. We look at the one-hour workers and we see...who do we see? Many of us, like Peter, look at the one-hour workers and see the spiritually lazy: people like the rich young man who aren't up to Jesus' high standards, people who don't go to church, perhaps people who call themselves "spiritual but not religious." In the social context, perhaps we look at the one-hour workers and see welfare mothers, unemployed and illegal immigrants and others dragging our economy down.

But what's fair about our society? What's fair about the American dream? What's fair about my being born into a middle-class American family while I have sisters and brothers all over the globe are born into poverty and deprivation many of whom won't even survive to adulthood. What's fair about my being allowed and

encouraged to get as much education as I desire, while my sisters in Afghanistan and many other parts of the world are not permitted to go to school? What's fair about my sister having the best possible medical technology for her pregnancy and a healthy birth if my nephew, while another woman dies in childbirth in Guatemala waiting for her husband to return from town with the midwife? What's fair about CEOs making exponentially higher wages than the janitors, factory workers and secretaries at the bottom of the totem pole in the same company? What's fair about those working on Wall Street waltzing through the recession with huge bonuses in tact while the unemployment rate soars and while retirees watch their retirement savings plummet? What's fair about workers in sweatshops in Asia laboring for a couple dollars a day so I can buy a \$15 shirt?

With every natural disaster this country and the world experience we are reminded that life is not fair. Usually, it is the poor who are hit hardest by these disasters. The last time I preached on this passage was about a month after Hurricane Katrina. Katrina was a devastating reminder that life is not fair. What's fair about thousands of people, overwhelmingly African-American and poor, being left to fend for themselves when the flood waters claimed the Gulf Coast? It's no secret, there's nothing fair about the world in which we live and perhaps that's why our sense of fairness is skewed.

Whoever we perceive one-hour workers to be we know this much: God shouldn't be choosing *those* people over us. But when we look at who the one-hour workers *really* are we discover that they are not so different than the all-day workers. Like the all-day-ers, they have families the need to feed, like the all-day-ers, they're living day-to-day. Like the all-day-ers, if they don't work, they don't eat. If they don't work, their children don't eat. Like the all day-ers, they're standing around in the market-place, waiting for work. Is it *fair* that some get chosen to work and others do not? Is it fair that while one group is able to work knowing that at the end of the day they'll get their day's wage and be able to feed their families, meanwhile the other group is standing around with nothing to do but worry about how they will get a meal? And if they don't get that meal, how will they have the strength to work tomorrow, *if* they are lucky enough to get work tomorrow? From the point-of-view of the one-hour worker, that doesn't sound very fair.

And apparently, God doesn't think that's fair, either. And *praise God* for that. The Gospel tells us that fair has nothing to do with rewards distributed according to work, merit, status or anything else. God's grace is distributed evenly. Period. Regardless of what we do or how much we do. God's grace is us for who we are, not what we do. God's grace is not fair, it's *more* than fair. We all deserve to eat both spiritually and literally. We all deserve to feed our families. We all deserve a place in the kingdom. We all deserve the good life.

We say, "it just isn't fair!" And it isn't fair. It isn't just fair. It's *more than* fair.

Again, let's think about what the good life is. As I mentioned before, the good life has elements of material, emotional, spiritual and recreational needs being met. But the piece that I am embarrassed to admit I left out is that of caring for others. In his book on Christian ethics, author Robin Lovin explains that helping others achieve

the good life is an essential part of what the good life is. Lovin states, “Living a good life requires us to do some things to make our own lives good, but it also involves us in relationships that may require us to choose against what is most obviously good for ourselves.”¹ The good life involves us in relationships that may require us to choose against what is most obviously good for ourselves. I can’t live the good life knowing others are not living the good life unless I am at least striving to help them get there.

It’s not ok to simply mind our own business. It’s not ok for us to not personally hurt others. If we’re not personally working against inequality, exploitation, racism and violence around the world, around the country, and right here in Cowlitz County, we are perpetuating it.

Thinking back, Hurricane Katrina certainly showed us some nasty things out humanity and our institutional racism and disregard for the poor, elderly and otherwise helpless. But Katrina, like most natural disasters, also brought out the best in most of us. Across the country, people opened their homes to evacuees, sent millions of dollars and collected goods. The rescuers weren’t concerned about their rewards. Donors and volunteers were not seeking points from God but did what they did and always do because it is right. Because they know, on a subconscious level at least, that they cannot have the good life knowing their sisters and brothers are suffering. Materially, we are the all-day workers and when we extend a hand to the one-hour laborers what we are really extending is God’s grace.

When I read this passage, it occurs to me that if the landowner had simply paid the all-day workers first, they would have never known the difference. They would have never known that the one-hour workers got the same pay they got. It seems important to the landowner that those who consider themselves more deserving see the treatment the so-called less deserving receive. It seems the landowner wishes to humble those who deem themselves more deserving. Perhaps any among us who on occasion find ourselves judging others as less deserving, whether spiritually or socially, would do well to be humbled by this lesson.

Hear the Good News: we are called to extend the Grace which God has extended to us and in doing so, the Grace multiplies exponentially. We are called to stand up for the workers who have been waiting all day for their chance to earn a day’s wage. We are called to work for the truly good life for ourselves *and* our neighbors. We are called to partner with God in creating a world where there doesn’t need to be a “first shall be last” nor a “last shall be first” because we live in a world that is truly fair not only in our eyes, but in GOD’s eyes. And who knows, even though we *think* we are the all day laborers, the time might come when we find out that we are indeed merely one-hour laborers. For we know that we all fall short. We know that we all are in need of God’s grace that is just *not* fair, in need of God’s grace that is not *just* fair, in need of God’s grace that is *more than* fair.

¹ Robin Lovin, *Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), p. 11