

It's Just Not Fair!
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
March 17, 2019

Matthew 20:1-16

Jackie Bleakney is a regular participant in our Thursday morning Bible study. She has shared with us over the years a rich list of one-liners, spoken by her father, some of which he gleaned from a feed catalogue calendar back in the day. Whenever Jackie has a chance to share one of them, it makes the rest of us smile. A perennial favorite is *"of all our worries, great and small, the biggest are those that never happen at all"*

Her nostalgia often sparks mine, so I think of one liners my Dad says around my family. Some of them are funny, and some of them are just plain common sense, like:

"Take what you want, and eat what you take." (in fact, that one, his best friend had made into a plaque);

"If you can't be kind, at least have the decency to be vague";

"It may be your sole purpose in life simply to serve as a warning to others";

and finally,

"Accept that some days you're the pigeon, and some days you're the statue."

Honestly, that last one is almost good enough to commission a needlepoint that I would proudly hand on my wall, because it does seem to define a good portion of the human dilemma.

What is fair? How do we define it? How do you know when you are being fair or when someone is treating you fairly?

For a person of faith, is there a difference between being fair and being faithful?

Maybe you've seen them.

Groups of people hanging out, waiting to be hired for the day.
I've seen gather in the morning at various places;
at a checkpoint in Ramallah, outside Jerusalem;

at a street market in Oaxaca, Mexico;
and in the parking lot of the Home Depot in Bridgeport.

Men and women who want to work, standing and waiting for someone to offer them a job. They're waiting to pick vegetables, or shovel dirt, wash windows, or pass up roofing tiles.

If you stick around long enough to watch, you know that some of these folks will be chosen to work and some of them aren't. Which means that some of them will be able to feed their families, while some of them won't.

I think it's sad to be left behind like that.

The Bible story that Linda shared with us this morning is a tough one. On the surface, this seems like is a story about fairness, but it's definitely not fair. The day laborers are hired at different times. Some of them work the entire day, some of them work for just a few hours. At the end, they are all paid the same wage for different amounts of work.

Every one of them who went into the field, early or late, was paid the same wage. Every one of them received the money necessary to make it through another day. Every one of them was able to feed their family.

At this point, I have to tell you that I struggled for several hours trying to think about what to say next. Because this parable irritates me. I don't think it's fair. It all begins with the words: "*The Kingdom of God is like,*" which should have been a clue that we are not dealing here with how the world works—or with any concept of fairness we might be able to understand.

When I was a kid, my Mom had this Solomon-like wisdom to ensure everything between her two children was fair.

If she made a cake, and my brother and I were enjoying a slice, she'd make me cut up the pieces but she'd let my brother choose his first (or vice versa). This would ensure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that my piece would be precisely the same size as my brothers. That's how moms are supposed to do it. She was the true arbiter of what was fair and what was not.

But this is a story about what the reign of God will be like, and how the "kingdom of God" will unfold. And it's about how the world might work if and when we choose to live it by the light of God's love.

Here's the thing... I can't think of anything fair in the entire sweep of biblical history. Whatever I learned about fairness as a kid, or as an adult in the workplace, or as we might think in terms of politics or business or our day-to-day lives, it's just not represented in the biblical text.

Go ahead, prove me wrong! Please.

Which means, fairness is just not a biblical idea.

And that might be good news.

Because if it were simply a matter of fairness, every one of us would always get exactly what we deserved every day of the week and then big time at the end of the line.

If God were running the universe like an accountant, always keeping tabs on our actions and attitudes like some sort of heavenly bookkeeper, then many of us (myself included) would find ourselves perhaps a bit overdrawn.

Is it possible that there is a perfect person present among us here today? Someone who doesn't lose patience in traffic, or yell at their kids?

It is possible that there's someone here today who has never said or done something that they hope to heaven no one ever finds out about?

It is possible that there is someone here today who hasn't messed up big time or who carries absolutely no regrets about anything they have done in their entire life?

That's possible, I guess, but I doubt it.

If God is not fair, then maybe God is just gracious. If God is the landowner in the story of the workers in the field, then it is God who gives to each one of those workers the means to survive another day. God is the one who begins from the place of grace, accepting us and renewing us thereby giving us the chance to be gracious and caring for one another.

Then maybe Jesus lays out the story of the workers in the vineyard in order to invite us to treat one another with the same sort of grace.

If the world were fair, every person would have a living wage, every person would have a place to live, everyone would have enough to eat and basic health care.

If the world were fair, then we wouldn't have to worry about violence in the streets or in our schools.

If the world were fair, then rich and powerful people's kids would have the same shot of getting into an ivy league school as any of our kids do. We all know the world is not fair.

Maybe, then, Jesus is telling us that God expects something a little more powerful than fairness from those of us who choose to become disciples.

We're invited to embrace the amazing way of grace and become little outposts of an outbreak of the reign of God, tiny encampments of mercy and caring, a community of doers reflecting the goodness of God in a world that defines fairness mathematically rather than mystically.

Were you ever in love? If you were or if you are now, then you know that love has absolutely nothing to do with fairness.

Relational fairness is about quid pro quo. Relational fairness is about giving something to get something. You scratch my back and I will scratch yours. You invite me to your house for dinner and I will invite you to my house for dinner. I give you a present, you give me a present. I am nice to you so you will be nice to me—all a part of a very pleasant and very necessary social contract. Polite people do this sort of thing all the time and there is nothing wrong with it, it's all very fair, but it's not love.

Love is giving and expecting nothing in return. Love is sacrifice without any expectation of reward. If I love you only because I am hoping that you will love me, that may be fair, but it is not love, it is business.

Love is giving yourself away, because it is really the only thing any of us has to give. And it is the way of God.

Our little bible story ends strangely when Jesus says: "*the last will be first, and the first will be last.*" That, too, just doesn't seem fair. It seems counter to the way most of the world is; but then, we have a different path to follow.

We are called to follow the way of Jesus. We are called to love extravagantly, and we are called to forgive, to work for justice and peace and we are called to give, because we are loved and we are forgiven, and we have received God's grace in Jesus Christ.

It's not fair; it never was and never will be. We didn't earn it, we don't really deserve it, but it's a free gift. Yours to enjoy on the journey, today and forever. Together, maybe we can use that gift to make this world a better place. Amen.