

Daniel Wood

Sermon

Matthew 20:1-16

20 September 2020

I want to share a story from the Rev. Philip Martin of Epiphany Lutheran in Richmond, VA. He notes that this gospel lesson reminds him of his High School graduation.

“There were no valedictorians or salutatorians and no student speeches at all,” he shares. “The principal of R.J. Reynolds High School in Winston-Salem, NC, was a man by the name of Bob Deaton. He had served as principal at Reynolds for thirty years and apparently relatively early on in his tenure he had done away with any and all accolades at graduation. No one was allowed to wear any sashes for such-and-such honor society or any extra tassels or badges or anything else that might make them stand out above anyone else. All the graduates wore identical school color gowns so that if you were in the audience, you were looking at one big group of equal achievers. There was no way you could tell class rank or athletic prowess or how active anyone had been in extracurricular activities. I thought all of this was normal,” says Rev. Martin, “but I found out that Mr. Deaton’s decision to do this was controversial at the time—and I think it would still be considered countercultural—but he was adamant that on graduation day, everyone look the same. Someone told me that it was the parents of the top achievers who initially didn’t like it. In the eyes of the world, thought Deaton, a diploma was a diploma. The achievement was graduation itself, no matter how you’d gotten there, and that’s what that principal wanted to communicate.”

Now... who wants to suggest their child’s school do this? Oh how I wish we were live in the sanctuary right now so I could watch you squirm and look away from my gaze. Let’s be honest... we hate this idea. “It’s not fair!” I was an honor student all through school, honestly not sure how, but I was. I got the yellow sash in high school for graduating with honors, got the orange one at Clemson and a long purple tassel for my History Honors Society, and had I gone to graduation at Emory, I’d have had the gold sash there. I can remember being proud wearing those, I had earned them. My parents were prouder, my grandmothers even more so. So what seems fair to me is that I get acknowledgement for the work I do. That’s fair. But... is it really?

“Fair” is a funny word, just think about all the ways we use it in the English language. Let’s start with the meaning we are most concerned with today, Fair means something is in accordance with the rules or standards, it’s legitimate. To be fair, to hold in a balanced way, a fair procedure is something non-violent or gentle, a fair ball is in legal play on the baseball field.

But that is hardly our only use of the word. “Fair” also means of light complexion or hair. To be pale, blonde, and pretty is to be fair. Well... that’s just racist. What’s that got to do with balanced or legal? Nothing, unless whiteness is legitimate and blackness is illegal. I mean, this usage comes from the Old English and German: Faeger which meant pleasing or attractive.

The idea of “Fairness” are equal or balanced comes later and really complicates the word and its connotations. There’s been a whole hubbub around the Netflix show Indian Matchmaking because how “fair” someone is part of how well they match with others. They privilege, the women especially, who are light skinned. “Fair” equals whiteness... So... yeah, that’s sticky...

Then there’s using “Fair” as an adverb, They’ll be fairly pleased to see you, meaning they will be pleased to a high degree. So how does Fair come to mean something like a lot or abundant amount?

But wait, there’s more... what about that State Fair? The noun Fair means a festival or holiday, and now it’s like an amusement park? This one is actually the easiest to deal with, this “Fair” comes from Latin, *Ferae* and it sounded similar to the German “*Faeger*” that they merged to the same spelling but are really different words. Yay English!

But let’s loop back to the idea of “Fair” meaning balanced and also attractive, with this undertone of privilege. “It’s not fair!” A cry I know I bellowed all too often as a child... and if I’m honest with myself, one I silently scream in my head as an Adult all the time. Why do I have to fight Cancer and deal with other health issues when plenty of other terrible people get to live perfectly healthy without a care? “It’s not fair!” Why aren’t I ordained when I’ve been doing the same work for years and yet some connected 3rd generation Methodist pastor kid gets to walk in to commissioning without any real experience? “It’s not fair.” (I’m super exaggerating that one, fyi). Why did they get a promotion and I didn’t? Why do I have to do this thing while others don’t? How come they have cable and dial-up internet and we just have an antenna and no email? “It’s not fair!” (Oh that was like 2 years of my not-fair cries when I was a kid).

We are conditioned to want “Fairness” for ourselves and in our lives, its this sort of ingrained idea we learn very young... we equate it with equality and justice, we even think this is what the Kingdom of God is concerned with in some fashion... Fairness. But the question I want to ask you, and the question Jesus is posing with this parable today... Is God “Fair?” The short answer is a big, fat “Nope.” At least not the way we normally understand Fairness, but let’s walk through the parable a bit and look a bit more.

Jesus begins telling this parable after just finishing a discussion about riches and eternal life, the story of the Rich Young Man. The short recap there is a rich person asks how to get to have eternal life and Jesus responds, “Keep the commandments, sell your possessions, give the money away and follow me.” He then turns and tells the disciples, “It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God.” These are bombs going off, the disciples are shocked and confused. It has been common belief for a long time, and still is today by many, that the more you have the more you have been blessed by God, you must be doing something right. #BLESSED. Those who work harder get more, those who are more devout get greater rewards. Umm... no, that’s not how blessings work, and Jesus explains through a story.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a Farmer trying to bring in their harvest. The farmer goes out to hire some day workers. They find them at the usual spot, hanging out in the corner of the Home Depot parking lot, she talks to them and agrees to pay them \$100 for the day’s work.

They jump in the truck and head off to work, bright and early in the morning. Later in the morning, the farmer sees the harvest is not going to get finished, so they run back into town and pick up workers hanging out at Lowe's. She tells them I'll pay you what is right, just come work for me. This happens again and noon and then 3 in the afternoon, our farmer needs more and more workers. She heads out again at 5, now driving all over town and looking anywhere. She spots some people hanging out on a corner and rides up, asking why they are not working. "No one will hire us." "I will, jump in and you'll work for me." The farmer returns and the new workers barely get some work in before the whistle blows and the day is done. Our farmer calls all the workers up, and starting with the newest, pays them \$100 each and then goes down until she arrives at the first one she hired, those who worked all day, and pays them \$100. But those first workers, and probably many others, were grumbling, "What gives? Those over there only worked an hour and you paid them the same as us, and we've been breaking our back in the sun all day. That's not fair!" Our farmer replies, "Look, we agreed on \$100 right? Am I not fulfilling my obligation to you? It's my money, I can give it out how I like to who I like. Are you mad because I am generous?"

I updated the parable a little, but it's essentially the same. I somehow doubt that this story is high on your favorite parable list, it's not so easy to live with as say the Good Samaritan or Prodigal Son. No, this parable actually flies in the face of our culture and reminds us how unlike the Kingdom of God our society really is.

Many parables give us that warm feeling when we hear them. Oh... Jesus goes and gets the lost sheep, that's nice. Or when the father welcomes back the son, oh it moves my heart... but we often miss the punchline and critique, but not in this parable, it's front and center. It starts off well enough, even builds up a little warmth. The vineyard owner or farmer as I call them, is getting workers, is going to pay them a day's wage, a denarius in the text which is by definition exactly the value of one day's work and is also by definition the exact value of food, housing, and upkeep a family **needs** to live. The master gets more and more workers, even getting those who were passed over by everyone else. "No one has hired us." What comes to my mind is that these last workers were ones that may have had health issues, or disabilities, or were from the wrong race or culture group, they were the least of these and incidentally, the last workers. This gives me warm fuzzy feelings, aww... the farmer is helping those in need... giving them work when no one else will. But... I stop feeling those warm fuzzies real fast.

It's pay time and now things aren't so lovely. I imagine myself when I hear this parable as one of the early workers, hired early in the morning. I came to Christ as a young man, I work for the church, I lead and share the gospel with many people, and I think I'm pretty good at it. And I plan on doing this a long time and doing it well. I'm the ideal worker. Pay me well.

But now... those last workers, who barely put any time in, are getting the same reward I get. A serial rapist, criminal, murderer, thief, liar, greedy philandering scum bag who has never done an honest thing in their life repents and converts minutes before death gets the same glory I do. Oh... I've got a lot more words than just "It's not fair." To say about that... but this is church and I'm not allowed to say those words. Let's be honest... you do to.

We get all twisted up here because we live in a world, society, culture where equality and fairness do not mean everyone gets the same thing, but everyone gets back in proportion to what they put in. We are where we are in the world not because we receive equally, as we might want to believe, but because of how much we have put in and thus are getting back. That seems fair... I work more, I get paid more. But I have the advantage of being a white male, tall and dark hair, deep voice, possessing generational wealth, generational education advantages, good transcripts from school even though I barely worked for those honors grades... I plug all that in with my 40 hour work week and I get paid a "Fair" salary. But someone who doesn't get to have all those extra advantages plugged into the work they do, they work 40 hours, maybe across multiple jobs and locations, maybe they work hard physically in a job I could never do, and yet... they are paid less, but it's fair... right? What if we paid the McDonald's Cashier the same as me? Who's it not fair for? The Cashier... I bet they think it's fair... no it's me... the one with all the "right" things who cries "UNFAIR."

Now, before you start calling me a "socialist" or "communist", which most of you have already done in your head... and before you start trying to defend what is comfortable for you instead of listening... again, most of you already doing that... shoot, I do it just saying all this out loud to you now. Let's all just calm down and take a breath. This parable is not about changing our economic systems... well, not explicitly. It's about understanding the economics of God. It's about understanding the "Fairness" of God.

What is fair and what is not is a human construct. We invent it and we change it, as individuals. What is fair for me is really just my opinion on what I find to be good for me. That is very likely to be unfair for someone else. We, as a society, are working to try and figure out a good system of "fairness" for people, we just often figure out "fairness" for the "Fair" people first and work out the rest slowly and later. My cries of "That's not fair" are really my way of saying "I don't like this because I have set expectations and you are not meeting them." As the first workers saw those last workers get paid for \$100 or a denarius for one hour of work, I guarantee they started doing the math and changing the expectations. "Oh, I worked all day, I worked 12 hours, that means I get \$1,200!" And hence, the let down when they realize, it's not about how many hours you put in, only that you worked at all. It's not that the master is unfair, no they are overly generous to those who probably need that day's pay the most. Our problem lies with our expectation that as people working harder or longer or better, we deserve more and then finding out we don't get what we deserve... we get what we need.

Jesus uses the economic example because he knows this will hit us right in the gut, smart guy that Jesus. But it's really about love, grace, and mercy. Those workers who come in last, the ones no one else would hire, probably the broken and the least of these... they get what they need... the Love of God. They are paid one denarius like everyone else... remember, that's the value of one day's work and also the value of food and housing for one day... it's what they NEED. The workers who come in first, the strong and able, the best and the brightest, the first picks in the draft... they get what they NEED as well. Sure, we as humans WANT what we think is fair, what we think we deserve... but start doing that math... no really. Count all the good things you do, write it down if you want. Now write all the sins... the big ones and little ones,

they are all exactly the same value. And if you don't have more sins than good deeds, well then you're probably prideful and a hypocrite, so you know, add those too. Then we can talk about how no good deed has value without God and so aren't really worth anything if you are doing them on your own and so all those sins have WAY more weight than your good deeds. So... getting what you deserve equates to some harsh judgment. I for one am incredibly grateful I receive from God the Love I need... not what I deserve. God loves me... unfairly.

The world isn't fair and neither is God, and thank God for that! God is merciful, loving, and full of grace. God's justice is not fair or equal... it's Holy. That means the best of us and the worst of us, are all loved. The sweet innocent child, the holy selfless monk, the blue-collar drunk just trying to get by, and the mass-murdering terrorist... all loved by God. God offers mercy to us all, exactly the same amount and exactly the amount we need. I am not more valuable to God because I am a pastor, nor is the long-time member more worthy, or the most broken of us less worthy. When we come to the communion table to receive Christ's Body and Blood, we receive it all as sinners, and all walk away full of grace.

So here is what I want us to do now.

1. Try to stop using the word fair... it's super loaded with meaning that is not helpful for much of anything, and it doesn't actually express what you are saying when you use it. Find a new word, Just or equal, balanced or legal. You'll probably find it's hard to do and it'll change how you think about "fairness."

2. Use God's economy of Grace in your life. That doesn't mean pay your yard crew, your babysitter, and demand from your boss the same pay. Again, the economy is a metaphor here... But, if we are called to be disciples of Christ, working to bring about the Kingdom of God... then we need to love as God loves. Be generous as the farmer was generous, give people not what they deserve but what they need. The last among us need to hear that we love them, they need us to show it.

3. Lastly, be gentle with yourself. I imagine myself as the first workers but then often feel like the last workers. I'm my own harshest critique and my own worst enemy. I may work and sweat away trying to prove my worth but never feel enough.... Breathe... God loves you, and it has nothing to do with how hard you work, or how perfect you are, or how Blessed you feel... God loves you... period... exactly the amount you need.

Amen