

Message for October 3, 2021

Matthew 20:1-16

It is one of my less happy memories of childhood. I am almost five years older than my sister and so I was allowed to do many things long before she was such as go to movies and stay overnight with friends. Now I am sure that this only seems natural to us, but my sister thought that this was so unfair! Why should I get to do these things when she couldn't or, to turn it around, why couldn't she do the things that I could? I can still see her, sometimes crying and sometimes yelling, her voice quivering with rage, "It's not fair!"

It's not fair. Many of us expect that life should be fair but, as we all well know, sometimes it isn't, and this can be very hard for us to accept. This in fact may be why many people really don't like today's scripture passage.

It was the end of September, and the grapes had to be harvested before they were damaged by the driving rains of autumn. One of the great landowners decided that he needed extra help and so early one morning at about six o'clock, he went down to the village square where the day labourers had gathered hoping to be hired. He offered some of them a job: if they would spend the day picking his grapes then he would pay them one denarius. The men quickly agreed and off they went. Three hours later the landowner realized that he needed more help and so he went back to the square and hired some more men. This time though he didn't promise to pay a certain amount of money, instead he simply promised them a fair wage. These men agreed and went off to work. At noon he did the same thing again. Then, at five o'clock as the workday approached its end, he returned to the square where he saw some men still standing around. He asked them why they had been standing around all day and they told him that no one had hired them. He decided to do so and off they went to work.

An hour later at the end of the workday it was time to pay the men. The landowner ordered that those who had been hired last were to be paid first and that they were to be paid a denarius. What this meant of course was that even though they had only worked one hour, they still got an entire day's pay! Naturally the rest of the men rubbed their hands in anticipation reasoning that if those who had worked only one hour got a whole day's pay, then how much

more would they get? To their complete utter shock though, they too were paid one denarius each. Predictably they started to complain. Why should those who had worked only one hour get paid as much as them? Or to put it another way, why should those who had worked up to twelve hours only be paid as much as those who worked for one hour? It wasn't fair but that's not how the landowner saw it. He had promised those hired first a denarius and he had upheld his side of the bargain. "Take your pay and go" he said and so they did, no doubt some of them bitterly complaining about the unfairness of it all.

This is one of the more controversial stories that Jesus ever told. It is controversial and perhaps even disturbing because it challenges one of the principles that most of us hold dear in life, namely that life should be fair. And yet here we are being told that life isn't always fair. Indeed, since the landowner in this parable obviously represents God, this story even implies that God himself might not always be fair. So what then is Jesus telling us?

Historians have long known that one denarius was the average day's pay for a typical labourer in those days but only recently have the historians discovered what life was like for those workers. Originally the labourers owned their own small farms. Life wasn't easy and they lived on the edge; if they had one bad crop then they were forced to borrow money for the next year's seed. After a couple of years of bad harvests or low prices, the farmers were so far in debt that they could never repay the loans. The result was that they lost their farms. Slowly but surely the small family farms were bought up by the rich landowners and the farmers themselves became landless labourers. And back then of course there wasn't any such thing as employment insurance, welfare, and food banks either. If the men missed a day's work, then their family could go hungry. If they didn't work for a couple of days, then things really got grim. If they didn't work for a couple of weeks, then starvation was a real possibility. The last men to be hired in today's lesson were not lazy layabouts. Rather they were desperate and that is why they were still there at five o'clock. They would have been hoping against hope that someone would hire them for even an hour; one hour's pay wouldn't have fed the entire family but at least it would have bought something for their children to eat.

With this in mind, imagine their gratitude when that landowner was so generous and gave them a whole day's pay for one hour's work! He didn't have to and yet he knew that anything less than a full day's pay would leave a family

in need. The landowner opted for compassion and generosity rather than fairness, but the rest of the workers didn't see it that way. Rather they could not or would not look beyond themselves and so complained about his unfairness! The message of today's lesson is really quite simple though. On the 'positive' side, we are to try and be like the landowner. When we see someone in need and can do something to help, then we are to just do it and not worry about what is fair. On the 'negative' side, we are not to be like the majority of the workers in today's lesson, begrudging others and being jealous of their good fortune. But this of course can be easier said than done simply because many of us cling to the notion that life ought to be 'fair'. Consider this small example.

Suppose that you had been buying lottery tickets for years and had never ever won a thing. And suppose that last night the phone rang, and it was your best friend. She was so excited! Until yesterday she had never bought a lottery ticket before in her entire life and she had just won the jackpot! She is now rich beyond her wildest dreams and just had to phone and tell you, her best friend, the good news. Now what would our reaction have been? We would have probably said that we were so happy for her, but in our heart of hearts, would we have not felt at least a twinge of jealousy, reasoning that it just wasn't fair? We had been buying tickets for years and never won anything while she had just won with her very first purchase!

God has blessed us with so much and acknowledging this is what next weekend, Thanksgiving, is all about. And yet despite the many blessings that we have and experience, too often perhaps we feel discontented and are afraid that someone will undeservedly get one step ahead of us. Sometimes it even seems as if some people go through life with a little score card keeping track and getting upset if everything doesn't match their version of 'fair'. We can live this way, but this is not the way to peace and contentment.

There are times when life doesn't seem to be very fair and we may sometimes even reason that God himself isn't always very fair either. Perhaps he isn't by our standards but what we have to remember though is that our ways and God's ways aren't always one and the same thing. Indeed I suspect that in the end, God is more concerned about compassion than he is about fairness and that is the point that Jesus was making in today's scripture passage. Perhaps these words written by a theologian who has thought long and hard about today's parable provides a fitting note on which to end today's message.

“The principle of fairness is one of the standards people use in their dealings with one another. And if we want to hold ourselves and others to some standard of fairness, it seems appropriate to apply the principle to our expectations of God. We expect God to be fair. But this parable makes it clear that fairness does not exactly apply to the ways of God. It does not seem fair that the people who worked for only one hour in the vineyard got as much for their labour as the people who worked all day in the hot summer sun. The love of God transcends our human assessment of what is fair, and we cannot understand God solely in terms of fairness. Can we see the blessings that come to others and give thanks for them? If we live with the God of grace then we rejoice when undeserved blessings come to us, and to others.”

If we take today’s scripture passage to heart, then next weekend at Thanksgiving we will not only give thanks to God for his many blessings to us but also for his blessings to everyone else as well, even if at first it doesn’t seem to be fair.

Pastoral Prayer

Hear us we pray as we once again come to you in prayer, with both our thanks and our concerns.

We thank you for the gift of this autumn morning with all of its goodness and beauty.

We thank you for all whom we love and all who love us; for all of the people with us and with you who have meant, mean and always will mean so much to us.

On this Sunday before Thanksgiving, we thank you for the many material blessings that we have; that in a world where so many lack so much, we have so much such as our food, clothing, homes, medical care, peace, and security.

On this Sunday following the first official day dedicated to Truth and Reconciliation, we acknowledge that as a nation we have often failed the peoples who were here before us. Help us to learn from the mistakes of the past so that there may truly be reconciliation, now and in the future.

We pray this day for our nation as the pandemic continues, and especially for the people of Alberta and Saskatchewan as their medical systems still struggle to cope.

We pray for healing for all those who are ill, whether it be from Covid or another illness.

We pray for all those who grieve because of the loss of someone they loved.

We remember and pray for all those who, even in this land of plenty, are struggling to get by. Keep us mindful of the needs of others, whatever their needs may be. Help us not to be self focused, concerned about what may or may not be 'fair'. Grant that we may see what you see, hear what you hear and then do what you would do.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen