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First Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 20:1-16

### **“It’s Not Fair. It’s Better Than Fair”**

*O God, your ways are not our ways, and yet we ask that you instruct us in the way everlasting. Guide us upon your path eternal. Instill your truth in our hearts that we would live more fully regardless of circumstance and with no thought of reward. We acknowledge that you, O Lord, are sovereign over all and give and take as you deem. Keep our eyes so focused upon you that we would live only to serve and praise you all the days of our lives. Amen.*

In her memorable sermon on Matthew 20 (see Long and Plantinga, *A Chorus of Witnesses*), Barbara Brown Taylor says that this parable is a little like the cod liver oil that mothers used to give their kids to cure what ailed them: you know it's good for you, you trust the one who is giving it to you, but even so, that doesn't make it very easy to swallow!

Most of us are born into this world with a huge sense of childlike entitlement followed by a seemingly intuitive sense of fairness and unfairness. The 10 year old who cries to her parents, “It’s not fair” when her sister gets a bigger slice of the pie, is closely followed by the 50 year old who cries “It’s not fair” when the 30 year old gets the promotion he thinks he deserves.

It's like Charlie Brown's little sister, Sally, in the classic "Charlie Brown Christmas Special." You may recall that at one point Sally is writing a letter to Santa Claus and in the process generates an enormous list of things she wants. Then at the conclusion of her North Pole-bound missive she writes, "But if that is too much to carry, just send cash." When Charlie Brown sees this and despairs over his own sister's greed, Sally indignantly responds, "All I want is my fair share. All I want is what I have coming to me."

I'm afraid that's what most of us want, even long after we become much older than Sally Brown. We want what is fair. So we chafe, we stomp our feet or wag our heads when we spy apparent unfairness.

For example . . . Terry and I were talking just yesterday about a podcast he'd listened to that discussed the question "Is it worth going to college?" When people factor in how much it costs to go to college these days, and how much debt a student can accumulate, or how much money a parent puts in to their kid's education that could have gone elsewhere – people are getting skeptical about whether college is worth the cost--- even when factoring in that college graduates earn higher incomes – there are more and more people saying college isn't worth the high cost. This led to Terry and me discussing the whole idea of college debt forgiveness. Is it fair to reduce or eliminate a graduates' debt? Is it up to us to pay for their college, especially if they chose to go to an expensive school? Or what about the parent who didn't contribute to their retirement in order to pay for their kid's college so the kid didn't have any debt? Is it fair to that parent who went without so their kid didn't rack up loans to pay for the kid who did?

Like most parables, the basic story here is simple and mundane. A vineyard owner is desperate to get his crop of grapes harvested. Maybe the weather is threatening to turn bad the next day, or maybe the grapes are so bursting with juice that if they aren't picked today, they will be rotten tomorrow. Whatever the situation, the work needs to be done in a day. Today. So at the crack of dawn the owner finds some eager folks lined up. It is like the scene repeated so often (and so heartbreakingly) in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. All those impoverished and desperate Okies have descended on southern California. There are more of them than there is work to be had and so the moment they hear a rumor that such-and-such farm up the road would be harvesting the next day, the truly eager would hop into their jalopies before sun-up so they could be the first in line. If you came too late, you would miss your chance for work that day.

In her book of sermons, *Sensual Orthodoxy*, Debbie Blue has some fun with Jesus' imagery here. She notes that these early-morning go-getters are commendable people now and were doubtless commendable people then. "Who's up so early?" she asks. The best people are. Admirable, kind and

hardworking people. The Sisters of Mercy are up setting out coffee and rolls for the poor and hungry. There's an earnest little boy up, eager to earn enough money to buy medicine for his sick baby sister . . . The people out there early in the morning, the first, are ready and waiting, eager to work for the householder. They didn't lay in bed repeatedly hitting the snooze button. In fact, they've already been to the gym, toasted their home grown oats for their oatmeal, and sweetened them with honey they collected from their native beehives, which are strengthening ecological diversity. They meditated and journaled. They showered, combed their hair, dressed neatly and were ready to work by first light. These are the people who have a good work ethic" (*Sensual Orthodoxy*, page. 81). They should be paid fairly for their labors. The early bird gets the worm, and all that stuff. Why, that's the Protestant work ethic that made this country what it is today!

So is it any wonder this parable rubs us the wrong way. Sure, it's wonderful that those late workers were paid generously. But come on! If you're going to be generous with the latecomers, at least be generous with the ones who arrived on time. It's the only fair thing to do.

But in this parable, God isn't fair. God is gracious. And that's two different things. Because grace doesn't always equal fair, and that's a hard lesson for us to learn no matter how many times we hear it. It was a hard lesson for the workers to hear. They grumbled; they called the vineyard owner unfair. Like us, they have an innate sense of what is fair and what is not. Equal pay for equal work is fair; equal pay for unequal work is not fair. Treating everyone the same is fair; treating everyone the same if they are not the same is not fair.

Life is so often not fair, which is why it seems all that much more important that God should be. God should be the one authority whom we can count on to regard people according to their efforts, who keeps track of how long and how hard we have worked and who does not let people break into line ahead of us. We should not have to say to the line cutters, "I was here first." God should do that, making sure everyone stays where he or she belongs, so that the first remain first and the last wait their turns at the end of the line. Life may not be fair, but by darn God should be.

But, but.

What if we're not where we think we are in line? What if we were hired last? What if, despite our surety, and confidence, and continued hard work to get to the top, what if we're not where we think we are?

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that where we see ourselves in line matters. And curiously, most of us see ourselves at the front of it. Because let's just admit that the story sounds quite different from the end of the line, wouldn't you agree, than it does from the front.

But I would bet that most of us see ourselves in the front. We see ourselves as the ones who have gotten the short end of the stick; the ones who have been cheated. We are the ones who have gotten up early and worked hard and stayed late and all for what? So that some backward householder can come along and start at the wrong end of the line!

That is how most of us hear the parable, but it is entirely possible that we are mistaken about where we are in line. Did you ever think about that? It is entirely possible that, as far as God is concerned, we are halfway around the block, that there are all sorts of people ahead of us, people who are far more deserving of God's love than we are; people who have worked longer, harder, steadier than we have; people who have more stars in their crowns than we will ever have, as Barbara Brown Taylor likes to put it.

Suppose for a moment it is us back there at the end of the line, craning our necks, hoping beyond all hope that the vineyard owner will be generous with us, too. What if you were the one at the end of the line, desperate for work, and heard the owner say: "We're starting at this end today." Wouldn't you be glad that the owner wasn't fair, but was gracious and generous beyond explanation?

God is not fair. For reasons we may never know, God seems to love us indiscriminately, and seems also to enjoy reversing the systems we set up to explain why God should love some of us more than others. But by starting at the end of the line, God is letting us know that God's ways are not our ways, and that if we want to see things God's way we might question our own sense of fairness.

God is not fair, and depending on where you are in line that can sound like powerful good news, because if God is not fair, then there is a chance we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will make it through the doors even though we are last in line – and not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

God is not fair, let's be clear about that this morning.

But God is generous, and when we begrudge that generosity it is only because we have forgotten where we stand before our God. You see, this story is not really about what is right and fair. It is not even really a story about getting what you earn or what you deserve. It is a story about grace and how we receive it. And understood in that light, I think all of us are probably at the end of the line.

Amen.

Sources:

Glenn E. Ludwig, Trinity Camp Hill Lutheran Church, "The End of the Line"  
Center for excellence in Preaching, September 12, 2005, content for  
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Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven, "Beginning at the End"