

"But That's Not Fair!" (Matthew 20:1-16)

When my son was entering 5th grade, he began a new public school. At the very beginning of the semester, the 5th grade teachers made it known that there was going to be a huge 5th grade production. Auditions would be held, points would be awarded and posted, and the child with the most points would have the lead role. How excited my son was! And lo and behold, when the points were posted, he had by far the most points. But then the teachers changed the rules. They said that since my son was new to the school, it wouldn't be right for him to have the lead role. How heartbreaking it is for a parent to see the child he or she has taught to follow the Golden Rule and act fairly be treated unfairly. You too probably remember the time when you saw the look on your child's face when he or she realized that the world was not as good, as fair, as he or she had thought.

As we grow up, we are hit with more and more instances of the unfairness of life. It's not fair that someone who cheats might get the best grade. It's not fair that the person who is drunk and causes the accident is the only one who lives. It's not fair that a woman who would be a wonderful mother can't have children. It's not fair that certain people are born without the opportunities that others are born with. It's not fair that those who want to work can't find jobs. It's not fair when someone is judged by his religion, his sexual preference, the color of his skin, his education, or where he lives and not by the content of his character. It's not fair that lying politicians get elected. It's not fair that those with no integrity often win. It's not fair that an innocent child gets leukemia. It's not fair that the bully doesn't get caught. What a list we could compile together, right? We could go on and on with examples of the unfairness of life.

And now, as if to add insult to injury, we come to church today and read about God's unfairness! Peter had just asked Jesus about the reward that he could expect. Peter said, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Peter expected that in the end, when he died, when the world came to an end, then there would be fairness. Jesus said that Peter and the disciples would be blessed for their faithfulness in following him. But then, according to the Gospel Writer Matthew, Jesus launched into another one of his stories, a parable which would have seemed blatantly unfair to Peter, as it does to us.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a man who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into the vineyard. Three hours later, he saw others standing around wanting work. So he hired them, telling them that he would pay them "whatever is right." Same thing happened at noon and at 3 pm. At 5 pm he saw more laborers who were idly standing around because no one had hired them. So he hired them too. An hour later, when the work day ended, he paid those who had only worked an hour the same amount of money he paid those who had worked all day. When those who had gone into the fields first grumbled, even though they had been paid what they had agreed to, the landowner said, "I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

We understand the grumbling of the workers who slaved all day, don't we? The fact that the grace demonstrated in today's story bothers us points out a problem not with the landowner, God, but with us. It points out the competitive jealousy which we learn early in life. Maybe, in telling this story, Jesus wanted us to see this competitive jealousy in us and come to the realization that competitive jealousy should be beneath us. Aesop had a fable about two eagles, one envious of the other because the other could soar higher and more elegantly than he could. So the envious eagle would pluck his strongest feathers from his own body and shoot them as arrows, trying to wound or kill the other eagle. It was his own undoing, however. He could not hit the high flying eagle, and he was eventually grounded by his lack of feathers. Envy destroyed the eagle. So too envy is the undoing of the real us—the part of us made in God's image. Envy keeps us from being as close to others as God would like us to be.

According to the German theologian Helmut Thielicke, envy also keeps us from being close to God. In a sermon on today's parable in his book The Waiting Father, Thielicke pointed out that "You will never be able to see the goodness of God with a jealous eye." So, if we want to see the goodness of God and know God as he really is, according to Thielicke, we have to get rid of our "jealous eye." And the only way we will be able to get rid of our "jealous eye" is by stopping the nerve-racking comparisons, calculations, keeping score, being sure that no one else is getting more than we think they deserve. Instead, we have to know and accept that God is the perfect parent and that he cares for every

child he created equally. Furthermore, we have to trust that each one of us is secure in his love. God won't forget about any of us. He has more than enough love, mercy, and grace to go around for all of us. We don't have to see each other as rivals. Our families, our friends, our nation, the stock market may all let us down, but God will never let us down. We can relax and feel safe in God's goodness.

Today's story appears only in the Gospel According to Matthew. Many scholars believe that this story was included by Matthew because of the audience for whom he wrote. Matthew wrote for those Christians who had come from Judaism. And we know that there was a lot of grumbling between the Jewish Christians and the non-Jewish Christians. This story would have reminded the Jewish Christians that even though the non-Jewish Christians had come to God much later than they had, they were still going to be treated the same by the Heavenly Father. This might not have been their idea of fairness, but according to Jesus' story for today, it is God's idea of fairness—to lovingly treat all of his children equally.

Ah, but it's so difficult for us to get our human minds around all this, isn't it? For it means that God greeted Mother Teresa, who lived her life among the poor, the same way he welcomed the man who cheated and lied all his life but confessed his faith in God on his deathbed. "That's not fair!" rises up in our throats, because we're so used to living in the world, in a meritocracy. But how very different fairness is in God's kingdom.

Worldly fairness says, "an eye for an eye....An honest day's work for an honest day's wage....If someone works harder or gets more education, they should make more money, have more, and live better than others....Sometimes you don't get second chances....Once a sinner, always a sinner....Those who work should be entitled to better medical care than those who are getting free health care....We should close our borders." But in the kingdom of God, we hear Jesus speaking such words as "Go and sin no more." We see a father running to embrace around his prodigal son, killing a fatted calf for him, treating him with the same love and joy he shows his other son who has been faithful. We hear Jesus saying, "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you..." We see around Jesus' table, not only hard-working fishermen but also prostitutes and lying, cheating tax collectors. And no one begrudges the

extension of grace and the equal welcome to anyone else. In fact, everyone is happy that everyone else has come to the table and is part of the kingdom.

A preacher named Susan Andrews said, "It is clear that God's grace is not sentimental. It is radical, and offensive and difficult to embody. The parable underlines the central Good News of the gospel—that we are saved by grace—not by works or education or wealth or power or fancy titles. We are defined not by how we compare to others, but by how much God loves us. When we truly allow ourselves to recognize and experience the generosity of God's grace, we may well recognize the poverty of our own spirit."¹

A man died and went to heaven. St. Peter met him at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in." "Okay," the man said. "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart." "That's wonderful," said St. Peter. "That's worth three points." "Three points? Okay, well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministries with my tithes and service." "Terrific!" said St. Peter, "That's certainly worth a point." "One point? Well, I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans." "Fantastic! That's good for two more points," St. Peter said. "Two points!" the man cried, "At this rate, the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God!" St. Peter smiled. "There's your 100 points. Come on in!"

Because of today's parable, we are blessed. We don't have to wait until the afterlife to know about God's grace. Because of today's scripture, we know now that our God is a God of goodness. He's a God of amazing grace. He's our perfect Heavenly Parent. And we know that as his children, we were created in his image. We have it within us to be better than the world would have us be. We have it within us to reflect his grace in our daily lives. When we're able to do this, even though we're still present in this world, we're already living in his kingdom.

Victor Hugo wrote a beautiful story that shows us what grace looks like when we humans live in God's kingdom while on this earth. According to Hugo's Les Miserables, because he was hungry, a man named Jean Valjean stole a loaf of

¹ Andrews, Susan R., "Preaching Matthew 20:1-16

bread. But, "That's not fair!" cried the world. So Jean Valjean was sent to prison for 19 years. When he was released, he was a bitter, hardened man. On his first night out of prison, because he was an ex-convict, he had a difficult time finding an innkeeper to take him. So, the town's kindly bishop offered him dinner and a bed for the night. The bishop's housekeeper wanted to hide all the fine silverware that was usually used for guests, but the bishop insisted that Jean Valjean be treated like any other guest. During the night, Valjean woke up, stole the silver plates, and ran away. The next day the police discovered the expensive silver plates in Valjean's possession. When Valjean lied and said that the silver plates were a gift from the bishop, the police marched him back to the bishop's house for verification. Imagine Valjean's surprise when the bishop did verify his lie. In fact, the bishop said that he was glad Valjean had returned--because he wanted to also give him the silver candlesticks! The bishop's amazing grace made such an impact on Jean Valjean that he became a changed person. Just like the bishop, Valjean began treating others with the grace of God's kingdom instead of the fairness or justice of the world.

What a beautiful summary of God's plan for changing the world...one person at a time....not through worldly fairness or justice but through grace. Amen.

--Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; September 21, 2008