

September 21 2014

Scripture Lessons ~

Psalm 145:1-9

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Matthew 20:1-16

Sermon *It's Not Fair! (Or Is It?)*

“It’s not fair! It’s not fair! That’s what my sister and I would always whine, when things didn’t go our way, as kids. Did you ever whine that when you were a kid? It’s not fair! And then my mom would inevitably turn and look at us straight in the eye and in a calm voice, and she would say that classic sentence, “Whoever promised you that life would be fair?” It was a hard bit of reality to hear, but the older I get, the more right my mother’s words seem to be---life is not always fair; or at least so it seemed.

Many of the good things of life are distributed in vastly unequal measure in our world. Some people are given really good looks or exceptional intelligence, like me! No, like some of you in the congregation, while others of us are given fairly average looks and intelligence. Some of us receive a sunny disposition and really never seem to have hard times. Others seem to be born pessimists and have a great deal of unearned trouble in life. Some couples love children and are unable to have children while others who may not be the best parents, keep on having babies. Each of us could tell one of those personal stories which would reinforces my mother’s assertion that life just isn’t fair.

Jesus’ parable, which Jim shared with us from Matthew 20, this morning , does not in any way deny the unfairness of this life either. In fact the householder in the story refuses to take any steps whatsoever to correct the inequality created by his “same pay for all” policy. To top it all off, he even asks those who protested against his policies,.....”Hey! Do you begrudge me my generosity-this is mine to do with as I will!”

To get a little bit into the story, the work day in Israel in Jesus’ time started at 6:00 in the morning. I think I would have missed quite a few of those hours. The owner of the vineyard needed help to harvest his crop, and the job needed to be completed very quickly, because if the rains came when the crop was still on the vine, the produce, of course, would be ruined. So, it became clear that more and more help was needed, the owners hired additional workers first at 9:00 in the

morning 12 at noon and 3:00 in the afternoon and then 5:00 toward evening, which we proverbial call the eleventh hour.

One of the most anxious times of my life was when I was trying to break into teaching as a substitute teacher. Some of you can relate to that. The name of the game was to get your name on as many district substitute lists, for as many subjects as you possibility could, even if you had to stretch the truth a bit about what you were qualified to teach in any particular school. The problem was that there might be a dozen other people on the same substitute list of any given school, or so few on another school, that you might be called out a number of times to a district which was so small and so far away, that it was hardly worth the drive sometimes 50 or 60 miles for the \$25.00 per day in millage. I spent many anxious days doing substitute teacher, filled with boredom and worry. Sometimes, I needed to go out and do other part-time work, just to make ends meet. But at the same time, I never knew when some district might call me out to teach or for how long that they might call me. Needless to say, it was not a good way to make a living, while at the same time trying to break into my new found career.

No doubt some of those later hired workers, in Jesus' parable, had spent days like those I spent as a substitute worrying about how they were going to feed their families day by day. Those hired at 3:00 and 5:00 probably worried that they would earn so little for short amount of time that they were in the field, that it was almost a waste of their time to bother to go. But in those days, what choice did they have to make?

What a joyful surprise it must have been to discover that they would receive a full day's pay, regardless of the number of hours they worked, and to be able to meet their families need at least for that one particular day.

The landowner's action was gracious, but we can probably identify fairly easily with those who had worked the full twelve hours that day, too. Because they said, "It was not fair!" If the men who worked for only one hour received one denarius, which was a day's wages, then those who worked more hours should receive more pay for the more hours that they worked but they weren't. They might have gone so far as to say that, did not begrudge their fellow workers the pay, but it was difficult for them not to see, at least, the principle of this thing that it is completely unfair.

And, of course, the principle of thing entire thing is unfair. Besides that, it is not sound business practice, either. But then Jesus did not tell this parable to illustrate that the kingdom is fair play or the kingdom of capitalism. Instead the parable showed something about "the kingdom of God." If the story is about the

kingdom of heaven, that realm where God's love is most clearly shown, then we must conclude that God's kingdom does not always operate on the same principals of what we consider to be "fair." It operates instead, on the principle of graciousness, generosity and love.

Some of you can relate to this. When my mom was a girl, her parents believed in enforcing a strict curfew, where dating was concerned. Some of you may be going through that stage, I don't know. If you weren't home by the same specified time after each date the price that was paid was a heavy price indeed. Mom grew up accepting this principal that my grandfather set, which I think 10 or 11pm, I can't say which. Of course, when the time came for me to start running around on the weekends as a teenager, there was a clash of ideas about what the curfew would be. It took a long time and it took lot trust but finally my mom was willing to bend just on occasion, and let me stay out later than the usual curfew, as long as she knew exactly where I was at the time.

But when it came time for my little sister to start dating and running around with her friends, there was very little discussion about this issue at all. She would be able to do some negotiating about the time of the curfew, as I had, as long as the same rules applied. Needless to say, how did I feel? "It's not fair" I couldn't understand why my mother was so much more lenient with my sister, than she had been with me. Her reply was that your campaign had been successful and I had convinced her that it was ok to be a little more flexible, as a parent where my sister was concerned. So why put them through the same misery of arguing about it, when the ground was already broken on the matter? That didn't give me any comfort at all. Looking back though, I realized now that my mom was not operating out of a sense of "fairness." But instead, she was showing a lot of maturity and common sense, which I guess us parents are supposed to do from time to time, while at the same time expressing her love for both of her children. Unequal treatment did not mean necessarily mean unequal love in this case.

Some of us who have been Christians for a long time or members of the church for many, many years, may find ourselves sometimes, as new people and different people who come into our midst kind, of resenting it because those new people or different people haven't worked as hard as I did in the church making it what it is today. Sometimes under our breathe we cry, "it's unfair." Certainly those people are not entitled to the same consideration or benefits as I am entitled to. Surely they are not entitled to the same amount of the pastor's time. Surely they are not entitled to the same benefits in the next life that I am benefited to. But the parable reminds us that it is not fairness, but it is graciousness and generosity and love which are the key principles in the kingdom of God. Fairness in God's eyes is

not always the same as human conceptions of what fairness and justice are all about.

So imagine this extraordinary scene of the pay window of the landowner's barn at the end of the story. One of the men hired at the last hour receives a full day's pay and thinks a mistake has been made and so since he is honest he returns to the landowner and says, "Sir you gave me way too much. I didn't earn what you have given me today". To which the landowner replies, "No you didn't earn that much, but it is mine to give and I want you to have it. Take it and use it with a great deal of joy.

It's not fair! Not fair! (or is it?) AMEN