

“That’s Not Fair”

Matthew 20:1-16

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 20) 2020

Kyle Childress

*You’ve probably heard the one about the two guys in the mail room. One is the CEO’s son, and the other some recent business school graduate. One promotion comes up and the manager who is to make the decision calls the two men into his office. “It’s come straight from the top, I have to award this promotion strictly on the basis of merit,” he informs the two aspiring execs. We all laugh when the CEO’s son replies, “That’s not fair!”*

- Stanley Fish, *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech*

I’m sure you have never heard this around your house, but I remember well, that at our house, “That’s not fair!” was heard often. Of course, what was “fair” to one daughter in our house was usually not the same fairness or justice that the other daughter understood. That is why we had referees, umpires, also known as benevolent dictators, sometimes called parents. Parents rule what is “fair.” They decide justice.

In order to decide what’s fair and just, we parents often needed to hear the background, the context. Plus, we considered which child was which and the history of their interaction and so on.

I remember when I was a kid, I thought my younger brother was the king of “that’s not fair.” Of course, my memory is clouded by the fact that I was the oldest, the most privileged, and therefore, I figured it was fair if I had more privilege coming to me. My brother didn’t see it that way. “It’s not fair, that Kyle gets to

stay out to midnight, and I have to be home at 10:00,” he might say. My parents, the benevolent dictators, pointed out that it makes a difference that Kyle is 17 years of age and has demonstrated trust, while the younger brother, Jay, is 14 and has yet to demonstrate trustworthiness. Background, context, history, makes a difference.

What’s fair; what’s just is not always the same for all people. That blind lady on top of the courthouses might define it one way all the while there are at least two lawyers down in the courtroom disagreeing over “what’s fair.”

People in our country, raised on “rights” language often think of fairness and justice in terms of rights. “It is my right to do such and such.” “I have a right to say whatever I want.” “I have a right to not wear a mask.” But such individual rights are not absolute. We do not have a right to ignore red lights because we do not believe in them or the right to spread COVID-19, just because we believe it is our right to be sick. We cannot yell “fire” in a crowded room, just because we believe it is our right.

Lots of us think of fairness and justice in terms of each getting what they deserve. We are well-schooled in capitalism to think that if I do one thing for you then you are to do something else in return. “Kyle, will you get me a glass of water, please?” “Sure, but what are you going to do for me?” That is called the “capitalistic-exchange model” of behavior and we know it well. It is well established in the world of politics and capitalism. You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.

But there are other ways to think of fairness. The church educator, John

Westerhoff, tells of being called in to consult about problems encountered by public school teachers at a school for Navajo children out West. One of the teachers told him that she was shocked by the lack of morals among the Navajo schoolchildren. “They cheat constantly,” she said. “We can’t make them stop.”

When he interviewed the children and asked them why they all looked on each other’s’ papers during exams, they told him, “Among our people, if someone knows, he should tell everyone who doesn’t know it. If someone does not know, he should go ask someone who knows.”

Westerhoff realized that here was a culture with a very different understanding of life than his own. What we have been taught to call cheating, they called cooperation. For us, it is about the individual rights and an individual education. For them, it is about what is healthy and good for the community. A good question might be which cultural stance is most fair and just? Depends on what you mean by fair and just, doesn’t it?

To be Christian is, in part, to be reminded, on a weekly basis, that we are meant to look at the world with different standards of judgement. As Christians, we are reminded that there are different ways to define what is fair and what is just.

We Christians get our accounts of fairness and justice from Jesus. And if you don’t know by now, Jesus’ sense of what’s fair is upside down from what most of have been raised to think.

Just after telling us that the “first will be last and the last will be first” (an

odd sense of fairness) in this morning's gospel Jesus says, a farmer has a job to do, a task to accomplish. His vineyards are ready for harvest. At daybreak he goes downtown and hires some people, agreeing to pay them a generous living wage. He takes them to the farm. They go to work. End of story.

But if you've ever heard Jesus on a roll with stories, you know that his stories hardly ever end when we expect or as we expect.

At 10 am, the farmer is back downtown. He sees some guys hanging around at the unemployment office. He tells them, "Come to work for me, I'll treat you right." (Or, "I'll treat you justly.") And they go to work in the vineyard.

At noon, he is back downtown, again. He finds a couple of more people who are unemployed, and Jesus says, "Heh, come to work for me and I'll treat you right. And they say, okay, and they go to work.

At three in the afternoon, in the heat of day, he's back downtown. Low and behold, he discovers a couple of guys still hanging out on the corner. Come to work. And they do. After all, they have nothing else to do.

*At five o'clock, one hour before quitting time, he's back downtown. Now there's nobody left worth hiring, but he finds one poor soul. He signs him up, takes him to the grapes, and the fellow goes to work.*

Finally, it is quitting time, all the workers are called in and the farmer tells his foreman to pay everyone the same wage, starting with the man who got there

last. All of the other workers yell, “That’s not fair! They only worked one hour and got a full day’s living wage and we’ve been at it since sunup and get paid the same. That’s not fair!”

Several years ago in a church where almost everyone was a farmer, a friend of mine was doing a Bible Study on this parable and asked, “Now what impresses you most about this parable?” Someone answered, “Here’s a farmer who’s never at the farm!”

My friend asked, “What do you mean?” An old farmer said, “He's never at the farm. He’s always on the road, back and forth downtown, wearing out his pickup. This farmer seems to be more interested in employment than in grape harvesting.” The farmer’s comments raises the question: why was he so determined not to stop until everyone in town was at work on his farm? Were the grapes over-ripe? Was he trying to get done before rain? All we know is that the main action of this story is hiring workers until, at the last, the last really were first.

In this parable, the focus of interest is not on the farm or the harvest. It’s not on the task itself. The focus of the farm-owner is always on the workers. In this parable he does not hire more workers because he had more to harvest than he originally thought. It’s not about the task. And he doesn’t hire more workers because it was getting ready to rain. He hires more workers because he sees them standing around out of work. He is motivated more by their need for work, not his need for workers.

God is no ordinary farmer. He employs folks no matter that the world

ignores or forgets them. He sees workers standing there late in the day like the leftover kids on a ball field whom nobody wanted on a team. He calls out to them, “Come on; I can use you.”

So, what do we do with a God who is like this landowner? Well, like the workers in the parables, we respond in various ways. The workers hired at sunup worked for a firm and clear contract – a day’s work for a day’s wage. The others hired were a bit more trusting about what they’d work for. The owner simply said, “I’ll pay you whatever is fair” (Matt. 20:4). The last ones hired struck no deal whatsoever; all it took to get them into the vineyard was the simple invitation to work, “You also go” (20:7).

At the end of the day everyone gets what is needed for a generous living wage. Everyone gets enough. Of course, the ones hired at the last hour are grateful for the living wage. For them, it is all grace. A gift. It is all grace for the first ones hired, too – after all they did not have a job at all early that morning – but they don’t recognize it as grace; as a gift. They gripe with “I deserve . . .” and “Where’s mine?” and “It is my right . . .” and “That’s not fair.”

All of the workers get a denarius, a daily living wage. So, what is a “daily wage” in the kingdom of heaven? If you look back to the previous story, Peter asks Jesus, “Look, we’ve left everything to follow you. What then will we have?” (Matt. 19:27). “What will we get paid?” And Jesus says, “A hundredfold, and . . . eternal life” (19:29). In other words, at the end of the day everyone who labors in God’s vineyard, all who serve in the work of the kingdom, will be lavished with the “daily wage” of the kingdom of God – the treasure of God.

Suddenly we see the poverty of spirit of the workers hired at sunup. God gives everyone an extravagant wage so great that no one could ever spend it all. A deluge of grace descends on all; showers of blessing are falling on everyone and everywhere. And here are the first hour workers standing there, drenched in God's mercy, soaking wet with grace, love and joy and peace dripping from their hair and clothes, griping that they deserve more rain.

And the owner asks, "Are you envious that I am generous?" "Are you resentful that my grace includes others?"

I asked earlier, "What are we to do with a God like this?" How do we respond to this God we know in Jesus Christ who is generous, grace-filled, merciful, and abounding in steadfast love?

Of course, when it shown toward us, we like it fine. However, perhaps the real test comes when God shows grace and mercy to people we do not think deserve it. There seems to be an incredible amount of resentment in this country these days because many people think others do not deserve help – a lot of judgementalism based upon perceived merit.

God's Way is where God is free to be generous and gracious. And God's world is where there is room to be effusive and even extravagant. God's world is not based upon rights or capitalistic-exchange, or even where one plus one equals two. As Robert Farrar Capon says, "If the world could have been saved by good bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses, not Jesus."

God's world is grace-based; not merit-based. God's ways are not our ways, says the prophet.

What would it take for you to be a grace-filled person living in God's wonderful vineyard? What would a church look like that was grace-based like God and God's vineyard? What would it be like if God's bounteous and generous grace overflowed from our church out into our community around us, around town and beyond?

We spend a great deal of time and energy in our lives worrying, fretting over what might happen and what might not happen, who is deserving and who is not, who's in and who's out, what the bottom-line is, whether all of the numbers properly add up, and on and on. We resent what we perceive as a lack of fairness and allow the resentment to fester and grow.

We're so afraid someone might get something they didn't deserve or earn. We're angry that someone got ahead of us in traffic or fearful that our careful bookkeeping will not balance at the end of the month or that someone might get a hand-out – and we certainly don't want that to happen.

Jesus is so very different. He calls us to the grace-filled life where our beginning posture in life is one of gratitude and grace rather than poverty of spirit. Where we live out of the plenitude of God's extravagant kingdom rather than the frugality and smallness of this old world's way.

During these hard times, I strongly encourage you to immerse your life in the grace and beautiful mercy of this God we read about this morning. Otherwise, we will become as mean and resentful, hard and brittle as many others we see around us.

Ray Vickrey was one of the most graceful – grace-filled – people I have ever known. Ray, the Pastor Emeritus of the Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas, died on Thursday afternoon at age 86, after several years of dementia. He was my friend and encourager for 40 years, and a member of our fabled group “the Neighborhood” – six of us clergy friends who have been getting together for 31 years.

Ray was tall and handsome, elegant and graceful. He moved across a room with a kind of agility and smoothness that I envied and admired. Always well-dressed, whether in an elegant suit and perfectly knotted tie, or a t-shirt and jeans, he always looked sophisticated.

Ray had gone to Baylor back in the mid-1950’s on a full-ride track scholarship and he retained that natural grace of a great athlete no matter how old he became. Once, at the Neighborhood, when Ray was probably in his mid-70’s or so, he and I went out to toss a football. I remember with pleasure watching him trot across the yard, reaching out to snag one of my errant passes, with the extraordinary elegance and grace that I saw in the rest of his life. He made it look effortless. He was one of the most graceful athletes I had ever seen.

To say someone is graceful means that they are filled with grace. It means that grace is not simply spiritual but is embodied; it is enfleshed. It means that God has given them a great gift and we can see it in how they move and use their body. And when we pay attention, when we watch that person, we have the joy of glimpsing God's grace and beauty. And not only that, if we pay attention, and open ourselves to God, especially when we're with that person, we can catch something of that same grace. People around Ray Vickrey caught grace. Grace infected us.

Ray told me once that when he first went to Royal Lane Baptist, the church was known as cold and distant, not very welcoming to newcomers. He noticed it right off, but he also learned that it had more to do with their shyness and less with being cold. He did not chastise them, but he set to work helping them become the warm and inviting church they are today. Often in the pulpit, but even more often in conversations in the parking lot and hallways, in committee meetings and informal coffee and lunch meetings, Ray told Royal Lane how warm they were, how open and receiving they were, and how gracefully they received visitors. More than that, Ray embodied that warmth. Demonstrated it. Over time, and it didn't take long, they started living into that grace and warmth. Over time, they became what he encouraged and what he embodied. They became graceful. He infected the whole congregation.

A few years ago, I watched Ray in action. He had long retired from Royal Lane but was back for an Alliance of Baptists meeting. Ray, dressed elegantly in a navy blazer, crisply pressed khakis, and perfectly knotted tie, stood at the door of the fellowship hall greeting people. His wife Sharon stood at his side because Ray could not remember anyone's names. With her quiet prompting the names came

back to him. What moved me, is how his gentle warmth and grace radiated from him as he shook hands and smiled. Sure enough, people caught his grace as they came through.

Let us give thanks for the faithful witness, the graceful witness of Ray Vickrey. And may we all be infected by the same grace of our loving and generous God. Then let's go spread it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.