

“Fair Is Different”

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Matthew 20:1-16 = the laborers in the field

One of my jobs while at University was as a warehouseman at W. W. Grainger's. It was hard work, unloading and shelving 40 to 50,000



pounds of freight. Yet it paid better than minimum wage, a whole \$2.15 an hour! And the hours were compatible with classes. It was a great job. I enjoyed working there.

I had worked there for about a year and half when I heard that my brother Lee was out of work. I knew Grainger's was hiring so I encouraged him to apply. He was hired on the spot for \$2.40 an hour!!

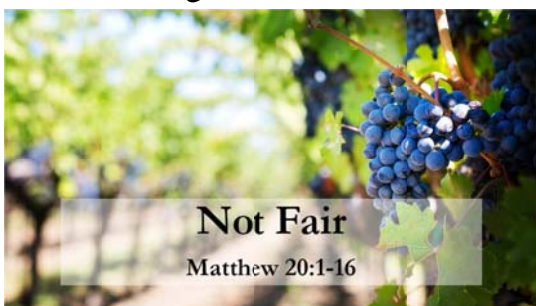
He said “hi” on the way out and when I heard his wage, I stormed into the manager's office to protest the unfairness. My boss' answer as he shrugged me off: “Life isn't fair.”

Unfortunately we've all heard this before: a newly minted professor elevated to the same rank as a senior educator of many years' experience; the sister who gets a bigger toy at Christmas; the son not permitted to go to a party when “all the other parents are letting them go!”



Or what Bill Nieporte experienced in his first congregation. Bill, a Baptist pastor and friend, was serving a congregation in Virginia dating back to 1778. The descendants of the 17 charter members called themselves the “first families” and they thought that gave them the right to direct all the work of the congregation. After all they had been doing just that since 1778.

Early on, Bill ran into a brick wall over a construction project. The organist, one of the “first families” had worked out all the details ahead of time. She took him aside before the meeting to dictate to him what the outcome of the vote was to be. Bill responded that the Chair of the B&G Committee had done equal due diligence and that



his proposal would be the one presented to the congregation.

She was livid. She was incensed because in her eyes the B&G chair was only a member a few years. “How could this newbie in the church, this “come here,” be shown the same amount of deference as she and her “first family” friends.”¹

In almost every gathering there are such “[p]eople who think that their history, or their longevity, or their wealth and influence, should somehow makes their idea[s] more important and valid. Those others have come to the game late and bring less to the table. It [seems unfair] that they should carry as much influence.”²

“It’s not fair.” Life is indeed unfair.

Our culture is unfair. Economics considers it rational that a professional baseball or football player who models for our children an over-the-top, immoral lifestyle is paid many millions of dollars, while an elementary teacher who literally has the future of our world in his or her hands, is paid just above poverty level.



Life in this world is emphatically not fair. The world owes us nothing. None of us should consider ourselves entitled.

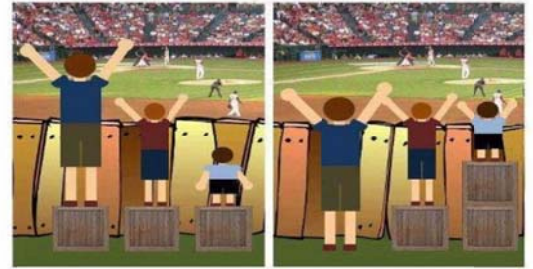
This is what makes Jesus’ parable so disquieting. Because while we know that life isn’t fair, we expect life will be fair in God’s realm. This parable of the laborers in the vineyard all paid the same wage no matter how long they worked, this parable tells us even God is unfair ~ at least in the way we normally define fairness.



The parables of Jesus have the power to surprise, even to offend us. Several colleagues have recounted how this parable in particular has the power to create such tension that it drives some to say they’ve “lost their faith” over it. Some people find it hard to think of the God of justice seemingly so unjust.

That’s Jesus’ precise point ~ what’s considered ‘fair’ is often in the eye of the beholder. What is considered fair in God’s beloved community is quite different from what is considered fair in this world.

In many ways, it is a simple matter of definition. There is a graphic making the rounds of the internet. It has two frames, one 'fairness' in the eyes of the world and the other 'fairness' in God's realm. It shows three boys trying to look over a fence to see a baseball game. One boy is tall, one medium and one short.



In the first frame representing 'fairness' in our culture's terms each boy is perched on one box. They are treated equally. The tall boy sees fine because he stands well above the fence, the medium height boy sees but just barely and the short boy sees nothing.

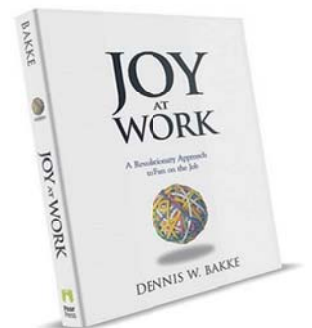
In the second frame, 'fairness' in God's community, everyone sees just fine. The shortest one is standing on two boxes, the medium on one box and the tallest needs no box at all. 'Fairness' is treating each differently.

How we define 'fairness,' whether with our cultural spectacles or with the eyes of faith, that's what makes all the difference.

God's fairness is not our fairness. Grace makes the difference. 'Fairness' for our God is different from how we would have designed it. God's justice is different than how we would design it. 'Fair' is different. Grace is different.



Dennis Bakke gets something of Jesus' intention, the shock and awe that this parable often brings. Bakke, former CEO of AES, an energy consortium, in his bestselling book *Joy At Work* tells how he intentionally integrated Christian principles into AES including a Biblical understanding of fairness.



When it came to fairness, he would ask people to complete the sentence, "Fairness means treating everyone _____." Ninety-five percent of individuals will respond, "the same," as would surely most of us. Bakke would reply, "I mean just the opposite." For Bakke "Fairness or justice means treating everyone *differently*."



We all know the image of the drill sergeant standing before the raw recruits and snarling out, "Nobody gets special treatment around here." What Bakke means by fairness is that *everyone* gets special treatment.³

Even more with God, everyone gets special treatment. That is the point of this parable. That is the point of the God we experience from Genesis to Revelation. We all get special treatment. Everyone gets special treatment, and there is no need to get upset because someone else gets different treatment ~ God knows the condition of each of us and by grace adjusts treatment to be exactly what we need.

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last"

God is unfair. The Gospel is unfair. Grace is unfair. Indeed, grace, God's grace is different. God's fairness is different, way different from what we would do. Way different than we could ever imagine.



Here's how it works: those weakest today will be strengthened. Those broken today will be whole. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry. Blessed are the mourners. Blessed are the marginalized.

That's God's way. That's the kingdom way.

Grace is different.

¹ Bill Nieporte, http://nieporte.name/fair.html?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=fair Sermon preached Sept. 21, 2014 on Matthew 20:1-16

² *Ibid*

³ Dennis Bakke, *Joy At Work*, pp. 28-29