

Life's Not Fair, But God Is

Matthew 20:1-16

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, September 24, 2017

Picture this: you worked at the same company for ten years. You're creative, hard-working and loyal. You put in extra hours without complaint because you love your work, like your boss and because it's the right thing to do. You realize your employer and customers depend on you so you want to give them back your best.

Then one day you get good news. Your boss comes and says, "I've been watching you for sometime. I'm giving you a new position with a higher salary. Business is so good I'm can now create two new positions with equal pay and responsibility. I want you to take one of them."

You feel affirmed, until you meet the new employee taking the other position with equal pay and responsibility.

You say to yourself, "She looks really young," as you introduce yourself and say, "Welcome aboard."

She replies, "I can't believe they hired me. I just got out of college and when I interviewed for this position I never thought I'd get it. Isn't it amazing?"

You smile and agree, "Yes it is." What you're really thinking is, "Gee, it took me ten years to get here and she just tumbled out nowhere. This isn't fair!"

Did anything like this ever happen to you? If it did, you can sympathize with the sunup and sundowners in Jesus parable who got equal pay for unequal work.

This parable took place in mid-September, harvest time in Israel. So it's timely to retell this parable but not just because it's mid-September. Throughout the year, you and I face fairness issues, or in this case, unfairness issues.

Our gut reaction is to identify with the all day workers because you and I've been there. We work hard and finally get ahead, then the new kid on the block appears and gets all the brakes.

To a lesser extent, despite the bad press they get in the four gospels, we can also empathize with the Pharisees in the crowd. These guys took God seriously. They did most of the heavy lifting to keep the Jewish faith alive in a Greco-Roman world. They could claim with justification, "If it wasn't for us the Jewish faith and the Law of Moses would've been lost and forgotten."

I've said this before, the Pharisees back then were very much like Presbyterians today. Despite their obvious faults then, and ours today, we're both striving for the same thing, keeping the faith alive for this and future generations.

Then Jesus comes along and pulls the rug out from under us with radical teachings dismissing our commitment to hard work.

God knows you and I struggle with fairness issues. We should also know it pains God when we think our efforts are unappreciated. But Jesus taught God wants us stop feeling unappreciated and start appreciating God's efforts to share the wealth of God's Kingdom.

God's grace, God's love for everyone is more expansive than we realize. We may think we deserve being God's favorites but it's not all about you and me. The prophet Isaiah reminds us, "God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways."

In other words, our wants don't always dovetail with God's will. To be in sync with God's will, our definition of fairness needs to be redefined by the Sermon on the Mount. Otherwise, our Protestant work ethic will be just as lethal as the Pharisees' legalisms.

Contrary to the prosperity evangelists, Jesus didn't suffer and die so we can get everything we want. He did suffer and die because to show us God's grace is sufficient.

That may sound like a platitude but it's one of the essentials of the Christian faith. Our ultimate value as God's sons and daughters will never be determined by cultural norms. Unfortunately, we've been carefully socialized to conform to these norms since childhood.

In kindergarten, the smarter children always get extra gold stars. In high school and college, the brightest and best are given higher grades and honor societies. No one can deny this system of rewards has merit, if only because it keeps the trains running on time.

Don't misunderstand me, hard work is a virtue. Without it, our families would suffer and human society would fall apart. But from the Christian perspective, the pursuit of excellence must be tempered by the way of Christ.

His better way begins with questioning the world's values. The two don't mix. Why else would Jesus say, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first?"

According to the Sermon on the Mount, the poor will be comforted and the meek will inherit the earth. Not because they are better than the rest of us but because they're needier than the rest of us.

Both the Old and New Testaments have teachings exhorting God's people to acknowledge the needs of the poor.

In Deuteronomy we read, "The poor will always be with you."

We like that quotable quote because it gets us off the hook. “Oh well, God predicts poor people are a fact of life. There’s nothing we can do.”

But, “The poor will always be with you” isn’t a prediction. There’s the rest of the passage we’d rather not quote, “I therefore command you, “Open your hands of the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

The poor aren’t just a fact of life. They are God’s children too and the rest of us are expected to help them.

It’s strange how good people with next to nothing can be more appreciative of what little they have compared to us who have everything but still want more.

Here’s a short story illustrating what I’m trying to say.

One cold winter night, a little boy and his mother were struggling to keep warm in their drafty, one room shack. They only had one blanket to protect them from the wind blowing through the wall’s cracks. The mother remembered she had a box of old newspapers under the bed. She stuffed them in the cracks before wrapping herself and her son and the blanket.

Feeling warmer, the little boy wrapped his arms around his mother and asked, “What do poor people do to keep warm when they have no newspapers?”

Jesus taught there’s a reserved place in God’s kingdom for the poor. We may bristle when God provides for them in ways God doesn’t provide for the rest of us. But God doesn’t love them more than the rest of us. God loves us all equally, so we can love each other equally.

When you first heard this parable didn’t you automatically identify with the ones who worked all day long?

And the story at the beginning of the sermon about the ten-year professional who learned someone just out of college was getting paid the same as him, didn’t that struck you as being unfair.

But in the story of the mother and child trying to keep warm in their shack, did you identify with them too?

Sometimes we identify with the haves. Other times we identify with the have-nots. It all depends on how the situation hits you. If you’re hard working to provide for your family, you might side with the ones working since sun up.

On the other hand, if you’re in a desperate financial situation, you liked hearing about those last minute workers getting equal pay.

But we still missed the point of the parable if we try seeing it from whichever situation we find ourselves in. From the human point of view, the outcome of this parable is either fair or unfair. The better way is seeing the outcome from God's point of view.

Notice Jesus began the parable saying, "The Kingdom of God is like a landowner."

Jesus didn't say, "The kingdom of God is like workers in a field." Catch the difference? Jesus draws our attention to the landowner. The landowner, not the workers is central figure in the parable.

It was customary for landowners to rise early in the morning to find workers in the marketplace. These early birds expected to get a fair wage for an honest day's work. They lived a hand to mouth existence. They needed the work so their families wouldn't starve.

During the course of the day, it wasn't unusual for landowners to go back to the marketplace to find more workers. Being desperate for work, no one dared quibble over their pay when the landowner said, "Come work for me...I'll pay you fairly."

If they didn't get a full day's wage, at least they'd get something.

This pattern of hiring repeated itself right up until the hour before quitting time. At sundown, the landowner lined up all the workers, starting with the early birds and ending with the Johnny-come-lately's.

One by one, each got paid off. But everyone was surprised when everyone got equal pay for unequal work!

It would be helpful the context of this parable. Matthew reports it was in response to what Jesus said to a young rich man he met on the road.

Remember the story? The youth wanted to gain eternal life. Jesus said to him, "... sell what you have, give the proceeds to the poor and then follow me." When the young man went away looking very sad, Jesus said, "It will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Taking all this in, Peter tried to pin Jesus down. He said, "Lord, we have left everything behind to following you. What will be our reward?"

Jesus didn't give Peter the answer Peter wanted. He wanted Jesus to say he would be doubly rewarded because he worked hard at being a good disciple.

But this parable didn't promise rewards based on your work ethic. The parable's central theme, "The last shall be first and the first shall be last," clearly shows God doesn't dispense rewards for a job well done. It is about God's right to shed his grace on whomever he pleases.

That explains the landowners blunt answer to the complainers. “Friends, I did you know wrong. I paid you what I promised. Take what belongs to you and go.”

And then the punch line, “Why do you begrudge my generosity?”

That’s a good question. Why do we begrudge God’s generosity to anyone except ourselves?

Another question, is only God responsible for being generous? If you accept God’s generosity, aren’t you obligated to pass it on to others?

Last Sunday we talked about forgiving others as we have been forgiven. If we accept God’s forgiveness, we are obligated to forgive others. Likewise, if we accept God’s generosity, we are obligated to be generous to others.

At the least, that means not getting our noses out of joint when the less fortunate catch a break.

We tend to think when the less fortunate do catch a break it’s somehow at our expense. We’re afraid somehow we’ll end up getting less since they’re getting more, even if it’s just a few crumbs falling from our table.

If you are in Christ, and you already experienced God’s grace and provision, shouldn’t you be happy when others received the same?

Last Monday night, we hosted an event here at Babcock Church. We invited our neighbors who are recent immigrants to be our guests. The New Beginnings Team’s sole purpose was to befriend these lovely people so we can share our mutual bond in Christ.

The parents brought their children, who happen to be students at Pleasant Plains Elementary School. For two and a half hours these kids patiently sat by their mothers. Not one of them ever complained. One of the boys, a kindergartner, proudly said to me, with no prompting from his mother, “I love living in the United States of America.”

People of goodwill, Christian people of goodwill might have differing positions on the immigration issue. That’s not our concern. The New Beginnings Team isn’t promoting a political agenda. Our only agenda is the Sermon on the Mount. Our only concern is, “What would Jesus do?”

What would Jesus do? The answer can be found in the gospels. Despite the Pharisees opposition, Jesus never once turned away a tax collector, Gentile or Samaritan. Instead Jesus welcomed everyone into God’s kingdom, where God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

When I saw the proscribed lectionary gospel reading for this Sunday my first thought was, “What a coincidence, it’s all about the last being first!”

Then I remembered, “There are no such things as coincidences. God wants us to hear a sermon on this particular parable on this particular Sunday.

We are a small congregation with a large building sucking up most of our financial resources. But that’s not all we have. We have God the Father creating opportunities to serve others. We have Christ’s example inspiring us and the Holy Spirit empowering us to make a difference in the neighborhood God planted us.

Back in the 1950s Babcock Church had a mission for its time. In 2017 the mission is different but the same. We are still charged with the responsibility to bring Christ into our neighborhood. As long as we are faithful, God will use us to bring his grace to everyone, the early birds and the Johnny-come-lately’s.

May all of us share equally in God’s grace as we receive it through Jesus Christ our Lord.