

*Fair is Fair*

Shepherd's Grace Church

September 21, 2014

For the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to the wealthy landowner who went to the market early in the morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. After he agreed with them for the usual daily wage, they went off to work in his vineyard. At nine o'clock in the morning, the landowner went back to the market and found men standing idly by. He said to them, you also go and work in my vineyard. I will pay you whatever is right. He did the same thing at noon and again at three o'clock. At five o'clock the landowner went back to the market and found men there. He asked them, "how is it that you are standing here idly all day long." "Because no one has hired us," they replied. He said to them, "you also go out and work in my vineyards."

When evening came, the landowner came to his manager and instructed him to bring the laborers in and give them their pay beginning with the last ones first and the first ones last. So when the ones who had been working only an hour came in they received the usual daily wage. Seeing this, those who had been working in the fields all day expected that they would receive more. When they were paid, they also received the usual daily wage. Upon seeing this, they were disappointed and grumbled after the landowner. They said, "you have made these who worked only an hour equal to us while we have born the burden of the day and the scorching heat." Then the landowner said to one of them, "friend, I have done you no wrong. Am I not allowed to do what I want with that which is mine? Did you not agree with me to work for the usual daily wage?" "Take what is yours and go. Or are you envious because I choose to be generous with what is mine? So it is that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. (Matt. 20: 1-16) (Also read Phil. 1: 21-30)

Have you ever been hungry? I mean really hungry? I remember a confirmation class here a couple of years ago where our first act of learning about church was a fast. I was going to invite the class to an 18 hour fast. If you think about it, that is not very long. You start the fast at midnight and by the time you wake up from a normal night of sleep, you have already slept through 7-9 hours so you are nearly half done. You skip breakfast which most kids that age don't eat any way and you really only miss one meal that you really miss. That, however was not the fast this confirmation class chose!

They had watched a video from the curriculum we were using and one of the talking heads recommended a 30 hour fast. As we were talking about our fast the kids were watching that video and all of a sudden, they wanted a 30 hour fast! These kids who had never fasted and intentionally skipped a meal before wanted a 30 hour fast! Now, no matter how you break it down, a 30 hour fast involves an entire waking day without food. A day of discipline for a group of kids who had never practiced that discipline! We talked about it and I think I tried to direct them to the easier fast but I could not dissuade them! They wanted the 30 hour fast.

We determined that we would begin our fast on a Thursday evening at 4 PM and end at 10 PM on Friday. The reason for that was that we were going to Remnant of Israel Messianic Temple for worship

on Friday and the people of that congregation always share an “oneg” a Hebrew word for breaking fast, meal immediately after worship. We were excited to break our fast with others who would have been fasting as part of their worship routine and our kids agreed that this was what they wanted to do!

I tried to be clear about the rules of the fast; no food, as much water and non-caloric beverage as they wanted. I recommended that they not plan anything too strenuous for the day because none of them knew how their bodies were going to react to being denied food. That said, we met at the church about 5 Pm on Friday evening to ride to Wichita and Remnant of Israel. When I first arrived, I could tell some were really struggling. They were grumpier than usual. They were fussing about car assignments and they were generally not very focused! We still had 5 hours to go!

Thankfully, the trip to Wichita was uneventful. As we rode, some of our drivers, not all of whom were fasting I might add, discovered that there had been some misunderstanding of the rules for the fast. Some of the kids had eaten a little, some had drank a little of that which was not supposed to be consumed. When they shared this in the cars, those who had followed the rules became very indignant to the point of mild name calling. No one was injured. I do not think anyone was emotionally scarred but there were some issues.

We got to Wichita. There we entered the temple of Remnant and discovered that some of the music was in Hebrew. The kids, being hungry and tired were not keen on learning anything new. Many of them became uncooperative and very inattentive. Worship started at 7 PM and even though we told them it would not be over till 10 PM they still struggled. Most of us would struggle with a 3 hour worship service, some of which was in a language we did not know, in a strange place with people whom we had never met. By the time 9 o'clock rolled around, our kids were generally inattentive, uncooperative and in very foul moods! They were hungry! They were really hungry and they were running out of patience with the clock! By 9: 15 they were fidgeting in their seats, some couldn't keep their hands off each other and others were starting to nod off to sleep. Now, I'm pretty sure some of you have come here from a 30 hour fast cause I can see you doing the same things from here!

By 9: 30, all of them had lost focus, all were wondering where the food was and not one was paying attention! When service was over, they did not know that there would be prayers and a tour of the sanctuary at the temple. They could have cared less as Rabbi Richard showed them the Torah Scrolls and shared with them how proud the people of the congregation were of what they had. All they wanted to do was eat! Finally, Richard led them down the stairs to a meal and they were able to be satisfied! They were hungry!

In Paul's letter to the Philippians this morning, he talks about what it means to be satisfied! Living in Christ is the goal, the hope and whether in this world or the next there are satisfactions in achieving that goal. Paul recognizes, however that the struggle is difficult for many. He knows the hardships, the sacrifice but he reminds us that even though we are hungry, even though we sacrifice, we still do not measure our sacrifice as anything compared to that of Christ! We stay, we work because Christ works in us! His work in us is transforming, life changing! His work in us is unimaginable. We are hungry! We are cranky, we are irritable but we are his! We are the church! Next week, we will continue this thought

but for now, we use it as a spring to understanding the parable that is set before us today by the evangelist Matthew!

While we are hungry, we have no concept, most of us as to what it means to be starving! I know some who gather here today have struggled some in the past to pay a bill or even to have a place to live but I dare say, none of us has been at the brink of death due to lack of food! Most of us have never gone a day without knowing where our next meal would come from and having some general idea of how we would pay for it.

In that way, we are among the most fortunate people on earth! Over 900 million people will starve to death this year. Many of them will be children who do not understand and have no way of knowing why they cannot satisfy their hunger. This year, our new young adult ministry, Psalm 23 will be studying world hunger and the issues involved in it. Tomorrow night, we will camp outside the church building here in an attempt to gain understanding of what it feels like to be hungry and live in a situation where that hunger affects every decision we make. We will fast tomorrow night through Tuesday and will break that fast Tuesday evening at our regular meeting with a conversation surrounding some of what we learned as individuals that will aid in our understanding.

Some of what we will learn, I believe is revealed in the parable shared this morning by Matthew. This parable is unique to Matthew and invites us into a comparison. We want to hear the parable as a metaphor, a likeness to God's kingdom. If we can hear it that way, we can understand that there is some difference between what we might think of as justice and what God understands as justice. We can accept these differences because in the end every one is taken care of and taken care of equally.

Sure, we struggle as anyone would with the idea that some would work all day long in the vineyards for an agreed upon wage while others will come late to the work and receive the same wage. In our capitalist society, we want to believe that we get what we work for, what we earn! We want to believe that fairness allows for the full measure of reward. We want to believe that even though we have agreed with someone for something, when we see others getting "something for nothing" we also will be entitled to something more! *Fair is Fair!*

We want to believe that in fairness the landowner will pay us something other than what we agreed to even though we did nothing to earn something more. We want to believe in a kind of free grace that invites us into a kingdom more comfortable than anything we could ever possibly imagine! We look around us and we see evidence of this kind of kingdom everyday! We see sports stars and movie stars who have made agreements to work at a contracted price. These stars go out and do their job and good things happen for the owners of their teams or the producers of their movies and the next thing we hear is that the star expects more money! The contract means nothing because the star did their job and the results attained by the owner were somehow greater than anticipated so the star is somehow "entitled!" *Fair is Fair!*

While we have become so accustomed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to this kind of treatment where the owner will re-negotiate with the worker, we can accept that this particular owner pays fairly based upon the previous agreement. We can accept that this owner at least lives up to his promise and pays what is

due! We can hear in this parable the feel good message for some who did not come to work on time and yet found a windfall. We can believe that the landowner genuinely wants to be generous!

We can believe all these things about this parable because we want to believe this is an example of how the kingdom of God will appear to us. We know that we did not come with the earliest Christians. We know that 2000 years of faithful disciples worked and went to work ahead of us yet somehow, our God is so loving and concerned for us that God will reward us in exactly the same way as all who came before. We want to believe that we deserve the same reward because while we have only worked an hour we have still worked hard! We want to believe we are entitled!

This is the way the parable has been taught for generations. This is the way we have come to understand God's grace, a grace given freely to all people who are willing to go out and work in the vineyard, a metaphor for the world, and gather in the harvest or plant the seed. We can understand the parable as, while not quite perfect, still an acceptable understanding of what the kingdom of heaven might look like.

The problem with this understanding is that it is not really what the parable is about at all! The problem with these interpretations is that they do not accurately reflect the message of Jesus for us today. There are plenty of places in scripture which accurately portray God's grace and love for us and invite us into an acceptance of that love. There are plenty of places that demonstrate the magnificence of the kingdom and encourage us to aspire to live in eternity in that kind of kingdom. There are plenty of places that demonstrate God's grace and freedom, God's generosity in ways beyond our imagination...but this is not one of those places!

Today, we are not invited to listen to an explanation of God's grace, we are invited to compare what we have learned about God's grace with that which seems like grace. We are invited not to imagine but to compare. The parable today is not about God's kingdom, it is about the world and the way the world really works and an invitation to seek more, to demand more from the world that the continued exploitation of the marginalized and the "less than" who are often invisible in our system! The parable is about the inherent inequities of a system that allows people to exploit others because they have greater material wealth or personal power than others. The parable is not a comparison of similarity, it is a parable of contrast.

For the kingdom of heaven can be compared to...this opening to Jesus' story is not like the opening to the parable he told last week where he said, "the kingdom of heaven is like." The difference now is that Jesus wants the disciples, the church to recognize a difference between the world and the kingdom. The kingdom is compared. The kingdom is contrasted with. The kingdom is different from. There is a distinction!

Why do you suppose Jesus wanted to draw a distinction in the story he was telling this morning? To answer that question, we must understand the context of the conversation. Jesus has moved from Galilee toward Jerusalem. In his travel, he has encountered a rich young ruler who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him, follow the commandments. He acknowledges that he has done that. He says he must obey his father and mother. The ruler again agrees. Finally he tells the young

man that he must go, sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor and come and follow him. The young man goes away brokenhearted! Jesus tells his disciples, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven! (Matt. 19)

The context comes though from the follow-up with the disciples. Once again, Peter speaks. "Lord, we have left everything to follow you. What is in it for us?" Peter, the rock upon which the church will be built (Matt. 14) who professes Jesus as Messiah and then is rebuked for fixing his eyes on earthly and not heavenly things; Peter who asks how many times he must forgive, thinking Jesus does not want unlimited forgiveness or cheap grace asks how many times he must forgive. Peter, who is likely smarting from the rebuke of Jesus and the lack of Jesus' acknowledgement of his leadership; Peter who may want to remind the other disciples of "his rightful place" in the hierarchy; Peter who is the metaphor for the church; asks, "What is in it for us?"

It is from this context that Jesus addresses the disciples this morning. It is from this context that Jesus speaks to the church! It is from this context that Jesus needs to continue to teach about the differences between divine and earthly things! It is for this reason that Jesus asks that we compare the Kingdom of heaven to a rich landowner! It is because Jesus wants to continue to draw a distinction between what seems right to the world and what is really right for God that He invites the comparison! He paints the picture of generosity and leads us into an imagination that God's generosity is great, that God even takes care of the poor in the face of the less poor, that God's wealth is so immense that God can perpetuate systems of wealth disparity just because God is God!

Several years ago when I was working in Dallas for the first time, I drove to work every morning past large areas of both housing and commercial construction. Just at the beginning of these areas were buildings run by a company called Labor Force. This company provided temporary labor on a daily basis for the construction companies who needed help with "odd jobs" that no one else was willing to do. Day after day I drove by these buildings and day after day I noticed the long lines of temporary help standing outside the doors waiting at 6 o'clock in the morning just for a chance to be chosen!...just for a chance to be noticed and to have some hope of earning enough wage to feed themselves or their families for that day! I often wondered how it must have felt to have to stand in line for work and not know if any was available or if you would be chosen to do it.

Labor Force represents the situation Jesus describes this morning. The company provides menial labor which for whatever reason is not good enough to be hired on a full time basis. The companies that use Labor Force obviously have full time employees to whom they pay not only a wage but benefits like savings and retirement plans, health insurance and compensated time off. These companies, however, still need other workers. They look to temporary labor supply companies to provide these workers at a cheaper price without benefits so they do not have to pay the additional cost...so they can increase their profits! These large, wealthy companies take advantage of a situation of unemployment in order to boost their profits and continue to increase the disparity of wealth in the industry!

Such is the case with the wealthy landowner who goes down to the marketplace this morning. He has other employees who work in his vineyard on a daily basis. These people are housed, fed and paid a

regular wage which is above the “usual daily wage.” The landowner, having gained his wealth by finding ways to maximize his profits recognizes an advantage however to hire cheaper labor to do the more menial jobs that his regular workers do not want to do. He recognizes he can save benefits costs and still accomplish the harvest in a timely manner if he takes advantage. He is not being generous when he goes down to the market place early in the morning. He is being prudent! He is being a capitalist! He is maximizing his profits! “Fair is Fair” right? These people need a job. He can pay them what is barely a living wage and everybody gains...except that he gains a little more! Does this look like the Kingdom of heaven you imagine.

Peter asks what is in it for us? What is in discipleship for the church? We have left everything he says and what do we get? Jesus wants him to compare a life of discipleship and the promise of the “Kingdom” with what he has, with what exists now. The status quo is a system where the wealthy and powerful take advantage of the poor and underprivileged not because they have to in order to survive, but because they can. The current system, the system of economy that Peter lives in is a system where the disparity of wealth is getting greater and where the poor are continually being pushed farther and farther to the margins. Jesus asks Peter to consider what he has, the world he lives in and then to imagine something other than that!

He says, “Look even at the way these workers are paid!” Those who were there at 9 and noon and 3 and 5 were there because they were even less able to work than those chosen to work at 6 AM. The unemployment was so great that they couldn’t find any work anywhere. This “generous” landowner then called them to work for him, probably shoveling sledge off the vineyard presses and subjecting them to subhuman standards even for an hour by asking them to do the work even the working poor from the morning would not do! Now, out of “generosity” he pays them the same as those who have worked all day and he calls that generous? Is it generous to take advantage of someone? Is it generous to pay someone a wage below living wage? Is it generous to pay one person the same wage as another in order to “rub the nose of the other” in the generosity? Does that sound like the “Kingdom of God”? Fair is Fair? How is it fair that one person is made to feel as if his or her work is not valued because another person’s work is rewarded? Does that sound like the “Kingdom of God”?

Today we can make the comparison for ourselves and see that in God’s kingdom, we will not be pitted against each other. In God’s kingdom we will not be embarrassed or subjected to subhuman situations. In God’s kingdom we will have a treasure that is stored up for us. (Matt. 6) In God’s kingdom we will meet those who came first and we will rejoice with them. We will recognize in them the diligence and determination with which they shared the good news. We will recognize with them the goodness and grace of a God who loves us so much that God does not withhold anything, even God’s only Son as a part of the reward! Those who are first willingly become last so they can watch with joy the “Good News of Jesus” come to fullness in a Kingdom which they have helped to bring near. The Last will move to the front so they can hear for the first time the ‘love ‘ God has for each of us and how great that is.

Compare the kingdom that is to come with the kingdom that exists and you will even more fervently pray the prayer that Jesus taught! Thy kingdom come, thy will be done! Compare and recognize how unjust the world is today, how the wealthy continue to take advantage and reap ever larger profits while

subjecting the poor to less and less and you will see Peter...you will see church that this world is not fair. What do you get? Peter wants to know. What do we get? The church wants to know? We get to bring this kingdom, we get to share this good news, we get to give others the message that we have left everything to share! "The Kingdom of heaven has come near!" *Fair is Fair!* Amen!