

Envy and Generosity
Matthew 20:1-16
September 23, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

As kids, we have a clear idea of what's fair and what's not fair. It starts at home, especially if we have siblings. One sibling got more presents than another. That's not fair. A younger sibling was allowed to stay up late at an earlier age than the older sibling. That's not fair. It continues at school. Two kids in the class acted up when there was a substitute, so the whole class has to miss recess when the teacher returns. That's not fair, say the well behaved students. Group projects, where the student who stared in to space and twirled their pencil for the whole week get the same grade as the other two students, who did all the work. That's not fair.

As we grow up, we learn that life just isn't fair. Bad people have good things happen to them, and good people have to deal with terrible things. That's not fair. But it is the way life seems to work. But we never lose, at least I've never lost, that immediate instinct to yell "That's not fair!" at least inside my head.

And this parable that Jesus tells is a doozy of a "that's not fair!" story. It starts out as a little bit strange, but not unfair. The landowner himself, rather than the manager, goes to town to hire some day laborers. He hires the first batch at the normal time, first thing in the morning. This is not outside our experience. People are hired for day labor every day of the week in cities and towns all around us. He likely needs some extra helpers for the harvest time. Again, this isn't unheard of in our time. This first crew, he hires for the usual daily wage. Nothing unusual or unfair so far, except these men were likely not paid a high enough wage for the difficulty of the labor they were performing. This, too, is not outside our experience. Too many people in our own time are underpaid for difficult work.

Then, things start to get weird, but not as weird as they're going to get. Three more times, the landowner make separate trips to town to hire more laborers. This in itself isn't unfair, but it's inefficient, wastes time, and makes him look incompetent, that he can't figure out how many workers he needs the first trip or two. Each of these three times, he tells the workers that he will pay them "what is right." This is a little odd. But I imagine that these workers had been fully anticipating that they would get no money that day, as the hours went on and no one had hired them. So they're willing to agree to work for this landowner for whatever he decides is "right." He's acting weird, by hiring them partway through

the day, but they are at that precarious end of the economic system, where they have very little to lose.

The landowner makes his fifth trip to town, and let me stop here and say it takes me about seven minutes to drive from our garage to “town,” meaning to school or HEB or the post office. Seven minutes in my air conditioned car, doing nothing more strenuous than pushing the gas or brake pedal. Yet I try very hard not to make five trips into town in one day. I try to group my errands to be efficient and not waste my time or my gas. But this landowner, presumably either on foot or more likely a donkey, is making his *fifth* trip to town to hire workers. He’s mostly spent his day going back and forth from his vineyard to the village, where the day laborers were congregated. For this last group, he doesn’t promise anything. When they say they don’t have any work for that day, an hour from quitting time, he just tells them to go to the vineyard. I suppose they think it’s worth taking their chances with this odd landowner, so they go.

Quitting time arrives, and that’s when things turn really strange. All of these laborers, the five groups of them, gather to receive their wages. The landowner pays the last group first, and they receive a full day’s pay. The three groups that came in the middle of the day also receive a full day’s pay. The last group, the laborers that worked all day in the hot sun, and boy can we relate to that heat of the day complaint this summer, they also get a full day’s wages. “That’s not fair!” they cry. And they’re right. They’ve worked harder, for longer than the others, especially those one hour slackers. They should get paid more. That would be fair.

Now, stop for a moment. The landowner didn’t have to do things like this. If he wanted to pay each worker a full day’s wages, and not upset any of them, all he had to do is pay them in the same order they arrived. The first group would have gotten their full day’s pay and left. Then he could have paid the later groups, and each of them would have left. For some reason, the landowner wants to put his unfairness on display, make the workers resent each other, certainly make them mad at him.

That’s not fair, Mr. Landowner! Mr. Landowner has two responses. The first is not endearing, particularly. He says, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” Essentially, I’m rich, so I can do what I want, and you have to take it. That’s true, but still doesn’t make it fair, and doesn’t make us like him any more.

His second response is: “Are you envious because I am generous?” Or, as the footnote tells us, the literal translation of that is “Is your eye evil because I am good?” The workers who are claiming “That’s not fair” are unhappy, maybe

envious, maybe resentful, maybe just discouraged from their struggle for daily bread. But they aren't happy. And it isn't fair.

Jesus introduces this whole thing with, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." The kingdom of heaven is not fair. The kingdom of heaven is not set up the way our economy is set up, or our labor market is set up, or our school system is set up. The kingdom of heaven is more about the we than the I. The kingdom of heaven has no limits on generosity. The kingdom of heaven is not like any kingdom humans have ever constructed. The kingdom of heaven doesn't count the number of times we're forgiven, or we forgive. The kingdom of heaven makes the last first and the first last. The kingdom of heaven doesn't operate like we do. The kingdom of heaven is about grace, unfair as it sometimes seems to us, the kingdom of heaven is about grace. And for that we are thankful.