



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

It's Not Fair

Sermon for 9-18-11

Scripture: Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

I wonder how many of you have driven by a labor pool where men are waiting from early morning to see if someone will give them a day's work. When I use to be a social worker in Laguna Beach, CA, twenty years ago, I drove by such a group almost every work day. These men, and I don't remember ever seeing a woman there, were waiting and hoping. Most of them were Latino immigrants, undoubtedly a lot them were illegal immigrants. I wonder how large the group would be in these tough economic times and if the ethnicity would be different. The Gospel lesson today describes a similar group of men, waiting for day labor in the vineyard. These day laborers in the ancient world were some of the poorest people. They were usually paid a denarius for the day's work, just about enough to meet the family's needs for the day.

Did you listen carefully to today's gospel reading? How did it make you feel? Angry? Thankful? What would you do or feel if you worked from morning to night with backbreaking labor and then an hour or two before you finished working someone else was hired and both of you received the same amount of pay? I think our sense of justice and fairness might get all stirred up. Most of us don't complain when the unfairness benefits us. I wonder if those CEO's that are getting paid over 300 times the wages of the average blue collar worker ever complain.

Let me ask you a couple of other questions for your reflection. What angers you most--someone earning the same for much less work or when someone goes hungry because they can not find a job or earn a living wage? What if your belief in what's fair leads to someone else's family going without food and money for the rent?



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Could this parable be about the 9th commandment about coveting, desiring what our neighbor has? Do we covet what God gives to another especially if they don't deserve it. Maybe even here in church some of you think that some folks are more worthy than others. Maybe you think some members are just worse sinners than you and so how could God give to that person the same as God gives to you? It's fine for God to bless them but should they receive as much as we do, we who have been working in God's vineyard for so very long?

I want to call your attention now to the first and last sentences of our Gospel reading. The reading begins by saying, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who" –and you know the rest. In the last sentence Jesus reminds us of the words he used to end the previous chapter: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

So what does all this mean? To me it means that in the kingdom of heaven God loves each of us so much that it doesn't matter when we come to God, early or late, we will all be loved equally. We are all God's children and we all need God's love and forgiveness. We all need a day's wage, our daily bread, if we are to live. Just consider for a moment what it feels like to be hired late in the day or not at all. Can you imagine the anxiety of going home empty handed or with so little you're your family will not have enough to eat. If one has enough, why would one want more than someone else?

It also means that with God's grace we do not earn God's love; it is there for us to receive because that's who God is. God gets to decide. In our more liberal congregations we are told God has decided to love and reward everyone equally. (That's quite different than those churches that preach if you sin and don't repent, you will go to a fiery Hell.) I bet there are a lot of you listening that still feel that it's not



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fair. Jonah was one of those people. He was so angry when God changed God's mind to save the people of Nineveh. God had sent Jonah to preach to the sinners in Nineveh. Jonah didn't want to go as he figured that it was a waste of time, maybe because the people there would not listen to him or more likely because he figured God would forgive them anyway, which of course is what God did.

One of my colleagues says people will find this parable offensive "if you weigh and measure other people rather than really try to love them as God loves them. It is offensive if you do not cry over the hunger of the unemployed and weep over those who are wasting their lives away in things that do not profit them. It is offensive if you are the kind of business man who thinks that generosity only counts if it is tax deductible."¹

When it comes right down to it, are there many people that are motivated to do that which will benefit the public interest or the common good rather than their own self interest? I struggle with this all the time—how much of my time and money do I devote to helping others versus preserving my own portfolio value for that hypothetical security for my later years or for my own rest and/or pleasure. Many of us see our good fortune as a blessing but do we also see it as a responsibility?

God's ways are not the ways of our society, our capitalist system, our beliefs about fairness. Is God asking us to change our thoughts and our ways? I know it's much easier to talk about than to do. I do believe God's desire is for us to be in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. None of us can do everything, but everyone can do something to make the world more just. What is the just and fair thing to do? How should we proceed? I believe we need a combination of prayer, contemplation, and then action. In our contemplation and prayer we can ask God to

¹ Richard Fairchild, Sermons and Liturgies for Year A, online.



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awaken in us God's own love and generosity as well as an awareness of others' needs. As this happens we will become channels of grace and comfort to others. The action goes both ways—helping to make a more fair and loving world as well as working on ourselves to get rid of all our attitudes that are not God-centered. Just as Jesus told the rich ruler, we cannot get through that narrow gate if we are carrying big bundles of pride, anger, prejudice, self-righteousness, and attachment to material things. That's a heavy load. I challenge each of you to get rid of whatever it is that limits your joy and keeps you from entering the Kingdom, that kingdom of reversed expectations where the first will be last, and the last first. None of us is perfect, nor can we live up to the ideal of God's generosity and love; yet we are loved anyhow. Thanks be to our gracious God. Amen