

Kids of a certain age are obsessed with fairness. Measuring portions of food, noticing the ways that other kids' parents seem to have more lenient rules than theirs do. It all seems so very self-serving. And yet, I have also observed children and youth point out ways the world is unfair to other people. While living in the Seattle area, I went out to brunch with a friend of mine and her young daughter. I had only about half of my enormous portion of food and carried a to go box back to the car. I noticed a young man sitting on the sidewalk who appeared a bit disheveled and I suspected he was likely homeless and hungry. I offered him my leftovers which he accepted with gratitude. I got in the car where my friend had just finished buckling her daughter into the car seat when the little girl asked me, "why did you give him your food?" As someone who is not a parent, the question threw me off at first. But I appreciated the opportunity for a teaching moment about generosity.

This is one story that came to mind when I read the scripture for this morning. The parable is yet another attempt by Jesus to explain the way God works to the disciples. These 12 men and likely some unnamed women, have just heard a different parable in which Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. In response, Peter says what about us? What about those of us who have given up everything and have followed you from the very beginning? In a sense he is asking, don't we get something for being your followers the longest? And so, Jesus responds with this parable.

If we are honest with ourselves, this parable is both comforting and troubling at the same time. It messes with the way we have been taught the world is supposed to work. The story starts out normal enough. A land owner is looking for laborers to work in his vineyard. He goes to the marketplace and hires the workers after agreeing to pay them the usual daily wage. But after this initial scene, the story gets increasingly strange. For an unexplained reason, the land owner returns to the marketplace multiple times throughout the day. The text doesn't say he returned to the marketplace for the purpose of hiring more workers. One would think that the landowner would have hired all the workers he needed in the morning. The text says that when he went out, he saw the other laborers standing idle and once he sees them, he offers them work. We get the feeling the landowner isn't hiring the workers because he needs them but because the workers need a job. He does not

make the same arrangement for pay with these later workers as he did with the first group. Instead of offering the usual daily wage, he simply says that they will be paid what is right.

At the end of the day, the land owner sees more laborers and asks them why they have been idle all day. They tell him that it is because no one has hired them. I wonder why. It's not that these laborers were out partying all night, slept late and arrived at the marketplace late in the day. They have been there all day. And yet, even if they had, knowing the parable of the Prodigal Son, I think that they would still be treated the same in this parable. I do wonder why these laborers had not yet been hired. Maybe they were weak, or sick, disabled, too old or too young, maybe they were foreigners or had a criminal record. These people for whatever reason, were deemed by other employers as undesirable employees or maybe there just wasn't enough work to go around that day. Whatever the reason, they had spent their day waiting and hoping for work without success and without a paycheck. The landowner tells them to go to the vineyard and promises them nothing. He simply says go.

At the end of the day, when it was time to get paid, the laborers who were hired first thing in the morning were expecting to be paid the amount agreed upon when they were hired. What they weren't expecting was for the people who worked fewer hours to also get the same pay. The landowner didn't cheat those earliest workers. They didn't receive less than what they were promised. So why were they upset? They tell their employer "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." Did you hear it? "You have made them equal to us." That's the complaint. Not that they were treated poorly, but that others were treated better than the first workers thought they deserved. You can almost hear the workers shouting, "It's not fair!" And you know what. They're right. God is not fair. At least that was my message the last time I preached this text. I've read many commentaries and heard many people say that this parable is about how God isn't interested in fairness. God is all about grace. I've come to think that statement is partially true. I think God isn't interested in our human understanding of fairness. But maybe God is very interested in God's understanding of fairness. I think when God looks at what's fair, God sees the whole picture, not just the immediate circumstance. God's fairness looks a lot more like equity and grace than making sure everyone gets what they deserve.

Growing up in Phoenix, it was not uncommon to see day laborers standing outside of Home Depot or even on corners outside of convenience stores hoping that someone would hire them. It's a difficult way to live. Very few jobs are long term, most only last for a few hours or a day or two. Some laborers keep their eyes open for U-Haul trucks, waving to the drivers signaling that they can be hired to unload the furniture and if a truck pulls over it's a race of the workers to get to the truck first hoping to be among the chosen for the job.¹ The vast majority of these men, and they are mostly men, are not lazy. They are not unmotivated. They are doing the best they can to provide for their families, put food on the table, and in many cases, send money to family in a different country where jobs are even more difficult to obtain, and poverty is the status quo. Human fairness would say that you get paid for the work you do. If the usual wage is \$10 an hour, and you work for 12 hours, you get paid for \$120. If you stand on the corner all day and one person hires you to mow their lawn and it only takes an hour, you get \$10. And what if you wake up at the crack of dawn in order to be the first one on the corner, but your child has a fever and is vomiting? Do you stay home to take care of them, and get paid nothing? Do you leave them and hope they'll be ok because otherwise you won't be able to afford to keep the lights on?

I think God's idea of fairness is not whether or not someone worked enough hours to deserve their paycheck. I think God wonders why we allow a reality in which some people happen to be born in a family with more money that they can possibly spend a thousand lifetimes, while others happen to be born in a place and a time when their family has no access to clean water, or basic medical care. God's fairness is not about what you earn or deserve based on your work. God is much more concerned about everyone receiving what they need.

So, I wonder if having a faith like a child means being concerned about fairness. But not in the way we traditionally have understood that word. Kids of a certain age are obsessed with fairness. Measuring portions of food, noticing the ways that other kids' parents seem to have more lenient rules than theirs do. It all seems so very self-serving. And yet, I have also observed children and youth point out ways the world is unfair to other people. Remember my friend's daughter who asked me why I gave someone my food? I

¹ <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/chandler/2015/02/15/phoenix-area-day-laborers-back-force/23479609/>

told her that he seemed hungry and probably wasn't able to buy his own food. "Why?" she asked, as toddlers do. "Well, I don't know for sure. It could be a lot of reasons. But some people go through a hard time in life and need our help." She seemed partially satisfied by this answer, but I could see the wheels in her head turning and turning. The whole situation didn't make sense to her. And it occurred to me that it shouldn't make sense to anyone. God calls us to co-create a world in which everyone has enough. What did this do to deserve to spend his day sitting on a sidewalk hoping for scraps? Nothing. Because no one deserves that life.

But this parable also speaks to how we understand our faith and our relationship with God. God is not interested in who is the best Christian, or the best Muslim or the best Sikh. God is not interested in whether or not someone has been going to the temple since their birth as an infant or if they discovered their faith in their final moments of life. God wants each of us to live lives of wholeness and generosity, and to welcome everyone regardless of when or if they came to have a relationship with God. A colleague of mine told a story about a member of her congregation who was upset because in the congregant's mind she was spending too much time with the "new people" during coffee hour. The church member had been attending the church for most of her 80+ years and commented that if it wasn't for the long-term members, the new members and visitors wouldn't have the church to go to. Therefore, the members who have been part of the church the longest should get more attention from the pastor. My friend responded that when she comes down for fellowship, she looks to see who is sitting alone or if there is someone new whom she hasn't had a chance to get to know yet. Those folks need her time and attention as much if not more than those who have lots of friends at the church and feel comfortable and at home.

I think this is what the kin-dom of God is like. It's not about putting in your time to get a front row seat in heaven. It's the truth that God doesn't play favorites. God loves us all and since God is not limited by human constraints of time and energy, God's grace and love is expansive enough to be poured out upon us all in equal measure. Even when we haven't earned it. Thanks be to God!