

## Sermon for September 24, 2017 – “It Isn’t Fair!”

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT, Year A – Texts: Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

### Westwood First Presbyterian Church ~ Rev. Jeff Colarossi

The scene in Matthew is becoming increasingly familiar. People are waiting for work, waiting to be hired to earn a day’s wage, which in those days was barely enough to feed one’s family. The issue then is one of daily bread. Just like manna in the Exodus narrative. Just like in the Lord’s Prayer. The parable of the laborers, especially the set-up, is strange. It begs lots of questions: Why does the landowner go out to the marketplace in search of workers five times a day, including just one hour before the pay time? Why does he bring in all the workers he can find, without stopping to choose those who seem healthier or more motivated? And why does he do this work himself? Why not send his manager? There’s more confusion at the end of the day. Here, he gives the same wage to every worker regardless of whether a worker began at 6am, at noon, or at five pm. One has to wonder, what in the world is this guy doing? What kind of landowner is he anyway? I mean, can’t he see how unfair this is? Seriously...To be hired late in the day and get less than a day’s wages; well, that meant belt-tightening for the entire family. And those who are overlooked or passed by when the hiring’s being done; think about what that does to one’s sense of self-worth. Not being chosen to work creates anxiety. And so, the lesson here...?

The lesson is one of extraordinary generosity. Everyone gets a day’s wage. Everyone can go home and feed his or her family. Just as it was with manna and quail in our first reading. Everyone got enough, no one got too much. Nothing was left over. Tell me if this sounds familiar...“Give us this day our daily bread.” It should, we say this every time we say the Lord’s Prayer. When we do does it ever occur to us just what it is we’re praying and saying? Forget paycheck to paycheck. How many of us have experienced living hand to mouth, one day to the next?

In His parable Jesus is jogging the collective memory of his listeners, most of whom were Jews. He’s reminding them of a very familiar story. The wilderness sojourn of their ancestors. The story of the Exodus. He’s setting the “wayback-machine” to the thirteenth century BC, to those thrilling days of yesteryear. The days where manna fell from heaven. The days of utter, radical dependence on God, and God’s daily provision. Back then, God makes it clear to Moses that you cannot gather the stuff up and save it for a rainy day. It goes sour on you, it spoils, it starts crawling with worms. Take it one day at a time and all will be well. Now too, with Jesus, everyone’s given a day’s provision; both those who worked all day and those who worked just a few hours. Like any household with children the cries of those hired early in the day are oh-so-familiar. “Hey, no fair!” they whine. “We were there first”. “We deserve more because we **did** more.” We say, “Life isn’t fair.” Or is it? What’s Jesus getting at here? Well, it seems that He’s trying to tell us something and that something is that what is/isn’t fair or just isn’t up to us...It’s up to God! The parable is, as they usually are, about God’s kingdom. Life lived under the reign of a God who’s generous to a fault, a God whose generosity often offends us and baffles us. Especially when it’s doled out to others!

One scholar observes that: “Grace isn’t grace if it’s qualified by superior virtue in the recipient. Sinners aren’t sinners if some are less dependent on grace than others. Besides, if one has enough oneself, why would one even want more than someone else? Unless out of some sense of pride and self-righteousness?”

“That it seems odd to put the question that way, so normal, so natural, is our desire to want more, just shows the depth of our sin. The more we insist on our quid pro quo way of thinking, the more baffled and angry we’ll be at God’s whole way of dealing with us.”

So think once again, with each passing hour as the sun begins to set about the chances of your family **not** eating that day growing. What must that be like? It would seem to me that even apart from the need for daily bread, so too, work, and those denied the opportunity for whatever reason, disability, age, whatever...They must feel a deeper sense of despair. Not to mention a keen lack of purpose and meaning in their lives. Work can be stressful, monotonous, and difficult, but to be out of work can be even worse. What’s the temptation? The temptation is to assume God serves **our** sense of what’s fair, our sense of “justice”.

The temptation is to believe that somehow those who come to the vineyard first and early are more deserving, that they've a higher claim on God, on God's generosity, love, and forgiveness. The temptation is to believe that we can actually **earn** the right to **more** than bread that's given daily.

But perhaps an even greater temptation is to think that it can ever be too **late** to accept the Master's invitation to work in God's vineyard. The good news is that God's grace is **so** great and **so** surprising that it can provide enough, no matter how late in the day it is, no matter when in life we accept it. This is possible because the recipient doesn't need to add anything **to** the grace we need only **receive** it as the gift it truly is in order for it to do its life-sustaining work. Such is the very nature of grace. Even as the sun sets on our lives it's never, ever, too late to accept God's amazing grace. And, it's never too **soon** for the rest of us to begin to consider that heaven's "enough". Heaven's daily wages, Heaven's daily bread, make all earthly comparisons look meaningless and silly. Jesus' assurance that the last shall be first and that the first shall be last is tied to what some call "manna season", when we settle for bread and wages that are given daily and understand that they come from God.

We're called to be people who pray, "Give us this day our daily bread..." and to make a concerted effort to actually live that out. An effort to live life in God's kingdom is a journey, as one scholar put it, to manna season, a season of living one day at a time. What does this mean? Well, for starters, it means trusting in the Lord. It means realizing that solutions to problems and answers to prayers may come over time. It means working through big problems by dividing them up because asking for our **daily** bread as opposed to weekly, monthly, or yearly bread is a way to focus us on smaller, more manageable bits of a problem. What do I mean? Well, think of it this way, when dealing with something very big, a problem or decision we're facing, don't we tend to bite off more than we can chew? Sometimes all we can handle is one day at a time, or even just a part of one day at a time. It means realizing that **daily** choices have **eternal** consequences. Thinking of our daily bread keeps us aware of the details of our lives, of the significance of the small things that occupy our days. Likewise, in daily choices. We may prevent certain bad influences from entering our lives and becoming part of who and what we are. It also means serving **others**. Remembering that we shouldn't only be looking **inward** as we seek a daily measure of divine bread. We should think of others, those struggling for their daily bread. I suspect that the journey should probably start by working toward being as generous to others as God is with us. It is as John 3:16 states: "**For God so loved the world that God gave His only son...**" God **loves** and God **gives**. That's God's nature. We're created in God's image. We're created to love and to give. We're to be as surprisingly generous with others as God is (and has been) with us.

It should be obvious by now that we're talking about more than food here and that the trip, at least at first glance, seems long and difficult. But, says Jesus, it's the journey of life. A way of living! Speaking of ways of living, you've heard me mention the Jewish word "tzedakah." You've possibly read about it in the bulletin. It's a concept in Judaism commonly understood as charity. Coming from the Hebrew meaning righteousness, fairness or justice. It refers mainly to the religious obligation to do what's right and just. But, it's so much more. It's a concept Judaism emphasizes as parts of living a spiritual life. In the Jewish writing, there's a story, it begins: "Tzedakah was slumbering and Abraham aroused it. How did he do it? He built an inn with four openings, north south, east and west through which he would receive wayfarers." What's this mean? Well, three of the entrances represent the three main categories of generosity in Judaism; Giving of one's wealth, giving of oneself physically, and giving of one's wisdom.

The first, wealth, is fairly obvious. Tithing is something of a given. Jewish tradition, however, emphasizes the **frequency** of giving as much as, if not more than, the amount. I'll get to why in a moment.

In the second category, giving physically, usually all that's required is the willingness to make an effort because helping others is something most people can do. Indeed, even the mundane, everyday activities of life are full of opportunities for concern and giving. They can take almost any form and the opportunities are endless, but many of them are missed. More about this in a moment too.

The third category is wisdom. Sharing one's knowledge/insight is considered a great kindness and an important part of Jewish tradition, especially among older people.

Abraham, as much if not more than the other patriarchs, excelled in all **three** categories of generosity. However, Abraham's inn had **four** entrances. What's the fourth entrance? Well, here's where I go back to the other three. The ideal of Jewish giving whether it's money, or wisdom, or giving of oneself physically, is that it isn't so much that you give generously but that you are a generous giver. As I mentioned earlier the size, or the amount, of the giving is less important than the heart with which one gives. In Judaism, it's about more than performing a kindness, one must become kind! For Jews, Abraham embodied this. He gave to others in every important way. The entrances to his inn symbolize the forms that his giving took. Three of the entrances correspond to the three dimensions of giving that I've described but Abraham went beyond that. He wasn't just someone who gave. He was, in every sense of the word, a **giver**. His giving flowed from a generous spirit from who he was in his very essence!

I think our Jewish brothers and sisters are on to something. And here's the thing, they realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy. And because we're made in God's image our generosity is the secret to our holiness as well. The vineyard in the parable is the kingdom of God. A world that is totally different from ours. A world, says one author, where "comfortable expectations are withdrawn, and the unexpected prevails." It's characterized by a landowner's generosity and mercy paralleling that of a father who runs to meet his prodigal lost son and a king who invites guests from the streets for a wedding banquet. In His parable, Jesus is saying that those who're called first are called to understand the world into which they've been invited. But more than that, they're called to join Him in inviting the last ones, the sick, the needy, the latecomers, the unimportant. They're to welcome them instead of comparing and complaining. I've heard that justice happens when we get what we deserve, that mercy happens when we don't get what we deserve, but that grace happens when we get what we don't deserve.

No, life isn't fair. And that's good news. Why's that good news? It's good news because life's not rooted in fairness, it's rooted in **grace**!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.