

FAIR VS. GENEROSITY

9/20/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA ~ *Online & Drive-In*
Proper 20 (A): Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

I bet every one of you can think of a time when something like what happens to the laborers in this morning's Gospel reading happened to you. When you showed up and gave it your all; worked hard and expected a fair amount of pay, recognition, or some other reward, acknowledging your contribution. Instead, someone who contributed far less was given equal acknowledgement. And some part of your brain probably screamed, "that's not fair!"

It's easy to stay in that place when considering this parable from the perspective of our day-to-day survival. Plus, plenty of us have been in situations where we literally had to be an advocate for ourselves to be paid fairly, and receive what our experience and skills rightly warranted. But, of course, this is a parable, so we know there's more behind it than just labor negotiations.

I wonder about that phrase, "It's not fair!" and how we are careful about when and how we voice it. For instance, I'm sure most of us would say, "It's not fair that so many people in Washington, California, and Oregon are having to battle wildfires, the threat of becoming ill with the Coronavirus, as well as struggling with unemployment, due to the pandemic, all at once!"

We know that's not fair, but applying the complaint about equality from the perspective of the early laborers, that it'd be more fair if everyone were paid the same rate for actual hours worked, I doubt many of us would say, "It'd be more fair if we all had to deal with a little bit of fire, a little bit of illness, and a little bit of unemployment."

At the same time, I'm pretty sure our reaction to this morning's parable would be much different if we knew more about the situation. There's a poem that seems to pop into my awareness every year or so. It's called "Kindness" and was written by Naomi Shihab Nye.

It starts out: "Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things." Just that line alone grabs me, and I realize, "That's right. I am more compassionate, when I know what it's like to have lost something."

But the poet gets even more descriptive as she goes; she writes:

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know

how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.

When I read that, I thought: Wow! That must be how those on the front lines of fighting for social justice must feel; or how someone must feel losing a loved one to COVID-19; or how people losing their homes to the fires must feel... to “feel the future dissolve in a moment, like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved.”

Loads of compassion swell up in our hearts when we start from that perspective! We want to help; we want to better understand; we want equity and justice, and we want to help level the playing field for those who have lost so much. We want to offer kindness.

Looking at the parable from this vantage point gives us a whole different perspective, right? Out of kindness, we seek to understand why some of the people could only work part of the day. Maybe they’d been caring for an elderly parent. Maybe some of them intended to work the whole day, but without a car had to rely on public transportation, and weren’t able to reach the job site until late morning.

“Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things.” Viewing things from a different perspective changes our assumptions. The laborers who arrived early made the assumption that everyone would be paid the same hourly wage for actual hours worked. But Jesus sets out different assumptions. Jesus isn’t talking about what’s fair, in terms of equal shares for everyone, rather that everyone should benefit in their own way from God’s generosity. The question from God in that passage ought to rattle us a bit: “Are you envious because I am generous?”

From the framework of kindness and generosity, we are called to remember there are very few assumptions we might apply to our lives through our knowledge of God. Simply put, the only assumptions are these:

- 1) The entire human race is God’s beloved;
- 2) We were all created in God’s image; and
- 3) God’s mercy and grace are not fair, or based on how hard we work for it;

Rather God’s grace is generous and abundant. The poet goes on to say that once we know what it is to lose something, what it is to experience sorrow and desolation, and can see how this could be us, then we realize, “It is only kindness that makes sense.”

In this world rife with conflict, pain, and suffering, Christ calls out to us to be kind—to share God’s generosity of grace with those around us. God’s mystery is not one that can be solved with a mathematical formula, or a set of balancing scales.

Instead, we must lean into the knowing that, in God’s kingdom, the whole is greater than sum of the parts. From that place we don’t worry about claiming our full share before others get theirs, because we understand that in God’s abundance, there’s plenty of grace to go around for everyone.

The Collect

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Exodus 16:2-15

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.”

Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name; *
make known his deeds among the peoples.
- 2 Sing to him, sing praises to him, *
and speak of all his marvelous works.
- 3 Glory in his holy Name; *
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

- 4 Search for the LORD and his strength; *
continually seek his face.
- 5 Remember the marvels he has done, *
his wonders and the judgments of his mouth,
- 6 O offspring of Abraham his servant, *
O children of Jacob his chosen.
- 37 He led out his people with silver and gold; *
in all their tribes there was not one that stumbled.
- 38 Egypt was glad of their going, *
because they were afraid of them.
- 39 He spread out a cloud for a covering *
and a fire to give light in the night season.
- 40 They asked, and quails appeared, *
and he satisfied them with bread from heaven.
- 41 He opened the rock, and water flowed, *
so the river ran in the dry places.
42. For God remembered his holy word *
and Abraham his servant.
- 43 So he led forth his people with gladness, *
his chosen with shouts of joy.
- 44 He gave his people the lands of the nations, *
and they took the fruit of others' toil,
- 45 That they might keep his statutes *
and observe his laws.
Hallelujah!

Philippians 1:21-30

To me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well-- since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”