

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, "For 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."

Upside Down Justice - September 20, 2020

Matthew 20:1-16

As many of you know, I work with children during the day. Before the advent of virtual education, I spent a good bit of my time supervising elementary students on the playground. My playground time was filled with a constant line of children between Kindergarten and 5th grade coming up to me and complaining. It was an endless parade of, “Mr. Higgs, she was mean to me, or Mr. Higgs, they won’t let me play, or Mr. Higgs, make the other team play fair.”

Sometimes I would get involved, other times, I would redirect the child or children to a different activity, pointing out that I did not have the power to make one child play with another. Of course, when I would get involved, I would always hear, “Well, he started it or, I was here first, or She just came over and sat down. We didn’t want her.”

Yes, children have a remarkable sense of fairness. I mean, they have a remarkable sense of what they feel is fair — to them. I have yet to meet a child who does not have very exact standards of what is and is not fair and has no hesitation about letting you know exactly where they stand.

Those of us who are parents of any child who can talk can certainly relate to the words, “It’s not fair!” It doesn’t matter whether they are being told to go to bed, not play with a toy, not watch a TV show, or protest the actions of a brother or sister, we’ve all heard, “It’s not fair” not once, but dozens of times throughout the week. Of course, we often respond by saying, “Life isn’t fair, get used to it,” don’t we? But for some reason, reminding children that life is unfair or at least seems unfair, doesn’t change things very much, does it?

Indeed, fairness, or our perception of fairness, is something that remains with us all our lives. Just because we grow up and become adults does not mean we stop thinking or even saying, “It’s not fair” when life doesn’t go our way.

The idea of fairness, of course, is highly subjective, isn’t it? It permeates our lives. We don’t get the job we wanted, it’s not fair! We don’t have the relationship we wanted. It’s not fair! We don’t live the life we thought we should be living or have the house we should be living in, or drive the car we think we are entitled to, it’s all not fair! And of course when we get sick, whether the illness is significant or fairly minor, it’s not fair!

Friends, both my parents died of cancer at relatively young ages. They thought it was not fair and I certainly agreed. There are many of us who have had relationships go bad, lost jobs, had our homes destroyed by flood or fire and it certainly is not fair when we look at all those who have led what we

think are trouble-free lives. There is no question that all of us have compared ourselves with others at least from time to time and asked ourselves why we don't have the "good life" others seem to have.

The great irony of determining fairness is that there are very few of us who believe that life has treated them with total fairness. We know that politicians, even at the highest levels, constantly complain about their unfair treatment by the news media. We all have seen stories of famous actors who complain about their relationships and how unfairly their partners have treated them. We all know of professional athletes who complain about their coaches or lack of playing time or their salaries, or any number of things. All of which leads us regular folks to ask, "What is wrong with you?"

Of course, many of us so-called "regular folks" lead lives that others would be very jealous of. Just about all of us listening today are white, aren't we? How many of us really understand that so many African-Americans have a far different perspective on the police and policing than we do? How many of us white people can relate to the twenty-five percent of Asian Americans who have been verbally or physically abused for carrying the "Chinese Flu" into the United States. As white people, we don't have to worry about what happens to us if a police officer pulls us over when driving — at least about being killed. No one will look at our bodies and accuse us of bringing a deadly disease into the nation.

You may know that I lived in southern Africa for nearly ten years. For most of the people, the life we have in the United States is simply beyond imagination. Having food, having shelter, having access to medical care, turning on a light switch and having the bulb work or the refrigerator cool or the stove turn on are things we take for granted which many do not. Most children in this country — and quite a few adults — assume that everybody in the world live just like we do.

Now I'm certainly not saying that everybody in our country has access to the basics of life. Our Covid crisis in fact has made it too clear just how many people have been living on the edge and with unemployment remaining high, we know there are many families who don't have food and may well be evicted from their homes. So much for the stock market doing well.

Fairness is, therefore, in the eye of the beholder. Things we might regard as grossly unfair in our lives, others would literally kill to have. The question is where is God in all this debate about fairness?

Every week, we proclaim our faith in a God of justice who stands for and promotes fairness in our world. Every week, we can see for ourselves, whether in our own lives or the life of the world, that the plans of our supposedly fair and just God aren't working out. There is gross injustice and horrible unfairness in the world, whether it is about us personally or people we know, or people on the other side of the world. Fairness and justice seem so random that it's hard to believe that God really has a say in how the world is supposed to work. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., said, "The arc of the moral

universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Yet is too easy to see that injustice and unfairness seem to be the norm, and not the exception.

What, therefore, is justice? What is fairness? In today’s parable, Jesus tells the story of a landowner who needed help to gather his harvest. At the start of day, he hired a group of workers, promising to pay them fairly. As the day goes on, the landowner saw he needed more workers and hired them in several batches, even hiring some just an hour before sunset.

At the end of the day, the workers were paid and the landowner started with the group he hired last, surprisingly giving them a full day’s wage even though they only did an hour’s work. Naturally, those hired at the beginning expected they would receive more, because they had worked much longer. But to their disappointment, the workers hired at the beginning received the same as those hired at the end: a full day’s wage. Those hired at the beginning protested, saying it was not fair they received the same as those who only worked an hour. Yet the landowner reminded them that they agreed at the beginning to be paid a full day’s wage and that is exactly what they received, no more, no less. How then was he being unfair to them? They had no answer.

And that, friends, is the problem with determining fairness or justice. It would seem that whether in the case of the workers in Jesus’ parable, or the case of children on the playground, the question of fairness is determined by our own self-interest. In other words, if something happens that we like, it is fair. If something happens that we don’t like, it is unfair.

As we find ourselves in the midst of this contentious election season, we constantly hear from politicians of all stripes their complaints of unfairness about how they are being treated by the news media, or government officials, or their donors, or those who disagree with them. Unfair! Unfair! Unfair!

The problem in determining fairness or justice is the quest to determine an objective standard that most people can accept. We call it the law. The purpose of the law is to offer society a set of rules and guidelines we all should adhere to. When we follow the law, we expect society to treat us fairly. When we break the law, we should expect some negative consequence or punishment. Yes, I know lawyers make their living arguing about exactly what the law says and means, but once there is agreement on what the law says, everyone is expected to follow it.

In God’s universe, therefore, law is intended to be a blessing to humanity. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God put it simply: obey these commandments and live. Yet, as we know, Moses had not even come down from Mt. Sinai with the tablets when the people began breaking God’s Law in earnest. They broke it then, we break it today. Why? Because the if the purpose of the law, of

justice, of fairness is to benefit as many people as possible, it follows that whatever the law, or rule, or custom is, someone, and sometimes you or me, will not benefit.

We go through life not only guided by the law, but also guided by many unwritten assumptions about how the world is supposed to work. For example, it was assumed for a long time that women are automatically better parents than men. Therefore, single women could adopt children, but single men could not. Fortunately for my family, that rule was changed in the 1990's so I, as a single father, could adopt my first two sons. We know that many assumed and still assume that certain racial groups are inherently superior to others, illegal immigrants are ruthless criminals, and poor people are lazy. Are these assumptions true? No! Are they fair? No! Nevertheless, they exist and many Americans cast their votes because they believe in many false assumptions that benefit the few instead of the many.

Too often, human notions of fairness consist of determining what the best outcome is for me, my family, and my friends. God's notion of fairness consists of what determining what benefits us, all of us. That's why the workers in Jesus' parable were upset. Even though they were paid the amount they agreed to, they could not stand the thought of others who were different from them receiving the same benefit. For many of us, human justice is when we are better than everyone else. God's justice, friends, is when we have equity with everyone else. Justice for one is true justice only when all persons are treated the same way under the law.

Two days ago, our nation lost a woman who dedicated her life to the pursuit of Equal Justice for All. Ruth Bader Ginsburg spent her life pointing out all the assumptions, written and unwritten, that stood in the way of equity and equal justice. Over and over again, she showed how injustice for one inevitably led to injustice for all. She rejected the concept that certain individuals or groups deserve to be treated better than others because of factors we had no control over: gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, skin color, language, wealth or lack of it, and so many other things. The cases she argued as a lawyer and decided as a judge always reminded us that once we start making some superior and others inferior for arbitrary reasons, those who are "winners" today will be "losers" tomorrow and the never-ending cycle of winning and losing will inevitably tear society apart.

True justice, what humans might call Upside Down Justice, is the justice proclaimed by Ginsburg and King and Jesus and Moses: the point of justice, the point of fairness is to do away with human assumptions of division and embrace God's assumption of equity and love. Let us strive to demonstrate God's upside down justice in this world.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.