

Fairness or Justice  
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale  
Date: September 24, 2017

16:48

Fairness or Justice  
Matthew 20:1-16

Have you ever been unemployed or looking for a job? Maybe that is your situation right now. Finding work, finding a job, is hard. You have to put yourself out there over and over again — “hire me! Hire me!” There are long periods of waiting. There is a lot of self doubt. Often there are financial problems. With no job, there is no money. How do you pay the rent, the mortgage, the phone bill, the food bill?

The hardest job I have ever had was looking for a job. And some folks have to do it day after day after day. Like day laborers, the folks that get hired here and in other cities and towns to pick apples or do construction or landscaping. Like the folks in Jesus’ day in today’s parable who stand at the marketplace and wait, hoping that someone will hire them, someone will allow them to work so they can feed their families at least for one day.

In the parable, the landowner comes to the market at dawn looking for workers. He’ll pay a denarius, a silver Roman coin that was enough money for subsistence living for one day. Let me repeat that: a denarius was enough money for food for one day.

The folks waiting around for work were one step up from being destitute or having to beg. They may have been homeless; they were certainly landless. They were definitely hungry. This is their only option: a chance at making enough money today to be fed today.

Strangely, the owner comes back and hires more folks telling them he would pay them “whatever is right.” And then he comes back again and hires more people and then more later--does this owner not understand his own labor needs? Finally he comes back to the marketplace one more time at almost the end of the day.

But, when it is pay time, he pays them all the same—those who worked eight hours and those who worked one hour. All get a denarius.

The workers cry out “Unfair!”

They are right. It isn’t fair to pay everyone the same no matter how much they work, is it? If the person sitting in the cubicle next to you only stumbled in at four and left at five with the rest of you and yet got paid the same...unfair.

It is unfair, yes. But is it just?

The landowner tells every worker that he will pay them what is “right,” or more properly translated, what is “just.” What does that mean? The workers who start the day assume it means prorated pay—you work more, you get paid more. You work less, you get paid less. But the owner gives all a denarius, enough so that each worker would be able to feed their family that day, for that is what he feels is just.

Is it just? What is the difference between what is fair and what is just?

We wrestle with this as a nation when we talk about affirmative action, the practice of looking at two identical applicants and, if one is a person of color, and one is Caucasian, offering the position, or the college admission, to the person of color.

Is affirmative action fair? No, it is not. Fair means everyone gets the same. Fair is when my brother and I both got two cookies after dinner. Fair is sharing the coffee time hospitality work among many Pilgrim members. Fair is charging everyone the same amount in sales tax.

Affirmative action is not fair. But, it is just? Just is different than fair. Being just means working to bring about the kingdom of God and it is not based on proportional allotment; it is based on need and generosity and inclusion. Justice is ensuring everyone gets what they need which is different from person to person.

Affirmative action was created to address the pervasive and often ignored force of institutionalized racism in this country. A child of color in this country will not be offered the same opportunities, advancement possibilities, or education quality because systemic racism exists. Thus, affirmative action seeks to bring justice to the situation.

Critics say it is not fair. Supporters say in return that it is just. What does our faith tell us?

The owner of the vineyard pays what he feels is just, a denarius, to everyone who worked. We need to remember that if he had paid less than a denarius, all those who worked part of a day would go home hungry, would not have enough to make it that day. Clearly the owner felt that it was only just that the workers who came and worked for him had enough for their needs for that day. Though he claims to be generous, it is certainly not extravagance.

So why are the workers who came early so angry? The others are only getting enough for the day, or “their daily bread” as we often pray.

Why are they so angry? Well, deep in our hearts, we know we would be angry, too. It’s not fair.

In every congregation I have ever served, in every discussion I have ever had on this text, the gut reaction is the same: It’s not fair!

Why do the people who only work an hour get paid the same as those who work all day? Why don’t the ones who work all day get more? Not fair! Any child can rightly interpret the text this way as children have a very good sense of fairness. And they are right. It is not fair. Not fair.

But....is it just?

We sometimes equate fairness and justice. But they are very different. And Jesus’ point is that the kingdom of God is about justice.

As we pray “give us this day our daily bread,” what does “us” mean in light of this parable. We include all people in this prayer, that we all might have daily bread. We do not pray, “Give daily bread to those who work today, and work a full day, who have earned it.”

Part of the trouble with this parable is that it runs counter to all that our society tells us. We are told to work, to be productive, to accumulate wealth, to make our place in the world. We are valuable in terms of what we produce, what we earn, what we can buy.

And so we get stuck when looking at situations where people aren’t earning, aren’t producing, the way society expects. We grumble about giving these people their daily bread. And we grumble if someone gets something that we don’t, even if we have enough.

When my now eight-year-old son was in kindergarten we paid for him to go to all day kindergarten at the local elementary school. Half day was free; full day was thousands of dollars. The year after he finished, the town decided to offer full day kindergarten to all kids in Plymouth.

My first reaction: No fair! It's not fair. We paid and now they don't have to pay!

But isn't full day kindergarten what I wanted for the children in my town, in every town actually? I believe in it. I've advocated for it! Why wasn't I celebrating with all the parents with kids younger than mine that they would all have this essential access to free schooling?

I wasn't celebrating because it wasn't fair.

But it was right. And just. And something I passionately believed in. What was wrong with me!?

Matthew included this parable in his gospel as a message to his readers who were mostly Jewish. They felt they had lived their whole lives in accordance with the law and following God and now received the blessing of Jesus, the awaited Messiah. But now these Gentiles, those who were pagans or followed the Roman mystery religions, they now wanted in. They wanted to follow Jesus, these last minute joiners. It was not fair.

Just like if a visitor to Pilgrim comes and sits in your seat, the seat you've had with your family for decades. It's not fair!

Fairness or justice? Who is welcome in the kingdom of God, who is invited, and do they have to earn their way?

Is it fair that some folks in this church contribute far more money to the church than others? Wouldn't it be fairer if we took the church budget divided it by our members and everyone paid the same amount? Yes, it would be fairer.

But would it be just? Some folks have more resources, some folks come into a great inheritance, some folks can't work, some are on a fixed income. So we ask folks to give as they can give, and to stretch to give a bit more, increase their giving, knowing that each of us is able to do that in different ways, in different amounts. It is not fair but I believe it is just.

Jesus is saying that God's realm is not a meritocracy. You don't earn your way in. You don't get in because you worked eight hours versus one hour. You are invited in because you show up. You are loved not by what you earn, not by your work, not by how much you are paid, but because you are. Because you are a child of God. Because you exist. The kingdom of God works on the principle of justice not fairness and we are called to apply that principle as well.

It's just that sometimes we get too focused on our own rights, our own perspective, that we forget others, forget what is just? When faced with what we see as an unfair situation we can ask ourselves:

“Am I more angered that someone earns the same as me or that someone goes hungry?  
What if my belief in what's fair leads to someone else's family being hungry?  
Am I more concerned about my rights or the world's injustice?”

Rights and justice don't necessarily mix in our culture. It may be legal to pay someone a wage that is below a living standard—but is it just to do so? This story tells us; “No!”  
(Jerry Goebel, ONE Family Outreach)

Notice in the parable that the landowner does not go back because he needs more workers. He goes back because there are more workers without work still at the marketplace. He asks why they are there idle.

This does not mean idle as in they are lounging in the shade and checking their iphones. No, this means, “why are you not working?” The answer: “no one has hired us.”

Think about it for a minute. Everyone who wants to work gathers in the marketplace. The bosses come to hire people. Who do they hire first?

The young. The strong. The able. The experienced. The smart.

Who does not get hired? The older, the weaker, the less able, the less bright.

Who is there at the very end waiting desperately even as night is falling: someone who has to bring a child along, someone who cannot lift or perhaps walk well, people so malnourished they can hardly work at all, people who are different. These are the “leftovers.”

Can you imagine standing there waiting all day long for a chance to work? Knowing you would starve if no one hires you? That your children will go hungry?

Keep in mind this is not much different than the men who gather in the parking lots of our local Home Depots looking for construction work for the day. Who will hire me? How can I survive?

The landowner goes back and back and back because he is compelled by the people who are still there. The people that no one else hires throughout the whole long day. The people who will starve if no one hires them.

So what happens if we hold up this parable to the society we live in? How does it change how we look at the proposal that may appear on next year's ballot of raising the minimum wage, some might say a living wage. Arguments against a living wage say that it will make goods and services more expensive to consumers. That is, consumers who already have their needs met. Does it matter if I have to pay more at a restaurant or to have my dry cleaning done if it means my brothers and sisters have enough food to eat and to feed their kids? What is just?

What happens if we hold this parable up to the debate about health care. Is having health care a privilege for those who can afford it? Or is healthcare a right that should be provided to every person? Fairness would say that everyone should pay to buy it at the same rates. That is what is fair. Justice would say that everyone who needs healthcare, all people, should receive it regardless of payment. It is fair that more wealthy folks will have to pay more into a system that provides health coverage for all? No, it is not fair. But is it just?

Is it fair that income inequality is so great in this country, far exceeding any other developed nation in the world? Some would say yes. One works hard, one gets advanced degrees, one gets paid more. But is it just? Why shouldn't we all get paid the same regardless of what jobs we do? Why is a pastor paid more than a housecleaner, or a CEO more than an elementary school teacher? Is it fair? But more importantly, is it just?

Following Jesus means looking to justice, not fairness as our measuring stick. That all people receive what they need, not what is fair.

Life is not fair. And God is not fair.  
Thanks be to God.

For all of us have at some point in our lives have been:  
loved more than we deserved,  
paid more than we earned,  
given gifts of presence and hope and opportunity far beyond what we could pay for,  
arrived at birth into a position of great global privilege  
and been held by God all through a long, dark night.

A just world looks different than a fair world. A just world is everyone going home at the end of the day with enough for that day. Ours is a just God. And we are called to seek that justice, too. Not fairness, but justice. Thanks be to God.

Amen.