

“A Generous God”
Matthew 20: 1-16
Sunday, September 18, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Life isn't fair. This humorous little story comes from William J. Carl III, in his book, Church People Beware!:

“Sometimes life just isn't fair. So we try to deal with the unfairness, like the little truck driver, just a little guy, who had parked his semi at the highway cafe and had gone in for lunch. While he was sitting there perched on a stool, three burly motorcyclists came in and began picking on him, grabbed his food away and laughed in his face. The truck driver said nothing, got up, paid for his food and walked out. One of the cyclists laughed to the waitress, ‘Boy, he sure wasn't much of a man, was he?’ The waitress replied, ‘No, I guess not. He's not much of a truck driver, either,’ she said pointing out the window. ‘He just ran over three motorcycles.’”

A rich young ruler asks Jesus, “What must I do to be saved?” Jesus says: Keep the law. The young ruler insists he has done so his whole life. Jesus says: One thing you still lack. “Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor...then come, follow me.” Scripture tells us that the young ruler walks away sadly, because he has great wealth. And Jesus says, “It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The disciples are very interested in this exchange, because they are wondering what their reward will be for following Jesus so faithfully. They are jealous of one another, secretly fearful that one among them will “get more” from Jesus than they do.

Peter, as often happens, becomes the spokesperson for the group. He says, “Look, we have left everything and followed you, [Jesus]. What then shall we have [as a reward]?”

In response, Jesus tells them his story of the laborers in the vineyard. All the workers are paid equally regardless of the hours they put in.

After reading the story, we may ask, “Is God fair?”

I. Is God Fair?

God, who plays the part of the landowner in this story, is clearly not portrayed as being fair.

How is it possible that workers who slave away all day get paid the same amount as shirkers who wander in at the last minute and harvest a grape or two? No way! That is so unfair! I’m with Peter. What’s the deal, Jesus?!

This parable is probably one of the least-beloved parables in all the Bible. Funny, given that people tend to really like the story of the prodigal son. The two stories make a similar point. But somehow, we are very ready to forgive the prodigal – maybe because we are so keenly aware of our own prodigal activities. At the same time, we cringe at the idea of paying late arrivals the same as those who have worked hard all day. It just doesn’t sit well with our Protestant work ethic.

We adhere to the value that hard work pays off, that fair work deserves fair wages, and so forth. We want life to be fair.

Children are keenly aware of fairness. Walk by any playground and you’re bound to hear, “That’s not fair!”

They are absolutely correct. Life isn’t fair. And, by extrapolation, God isn’t fair.

I just hate that. I want God to be fair.

Here’s what God has to say about that: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

This is the deal. God's in charge, and God, apparently, does not put fairness very high on His list of concerns.

An anonymous pastor writes:

“This parable goes against the business mentality that dominates our lives. We have always been taught: You get out of something directly in proportion to that which you put in it. Yet, that is not what happened in Jesus' story. In our way of thinking, the laborers who came to the field late got something for nothing. This parable challenges us not to look upon the Kingdom of God, or the church, as a business community. Yet, that is difficult for us to do, because that is our point of reference. What do you think would happen if a person joined the church this morning and immediately after receiving the vows of profession of faith I suggested to the congregation that he or she be nominated as the next chairperson of the Administrative Board. What do you think the reaction would be? Well, I think I know what the reaction would be. The laity would protest as loudly as Simon Peter is protesting to Jesus.

“You see, we live in a world of tenure and seniority and it goes against our grain when we hear Jesus say: The first shall be last and the last shall be first. God's grace is not based upon what is fair, but rather what helps.”

So what about productivity? If God isn't fair, maybe -- at the very least -- God is productive.

II. Is God Productive?

A reporter once asked Pope John XXIII, “How many people work here in the Vatican?” to which the dear old Pope answered, “Oh, about half, I guess.”

Even the Vatican has apparently given up on the idea of productivity and each one pulling his own load, each one doing her fair share.

Robert De Moor tells a family story along these lines:

“The parable of the vineyard workers (Matt. 20) offends our sense of fairness. Why should everyone get equal pay for unequal work? Back in Ontario when the apples ripened, Mom would sit all seven of us down, Dad included, with pans and paring knives until the mountain of fruit was reduced to neat rows of filled canning jars. She never bothered keeping track of how many we did, though the younger ones undoubtedly proved more of a nuisance than a help: cut fingers, squabbles over who got which pan, apple core fights. But when the job was done, the reward for everyone was the same: the largest chocolate-dipped cone money could buy. A stickler might argue it wasn't quite fair since the older ones actually peeled apples. But I can't remember anyone complaining about it.

“A family understands it operates under a different set of norms than a courtroom. In fact, when the store ran out of ice cream and my younger brother had to make do with a Popsicle, we felt sorry for him despite his lack of productivity (he'd eaten all the apples he'd peeled that day--both of them). God wants all his children to enjoy the complete fullness of eternal life. No true child of God wants it any other way.”

Hmmm. Maybe it's not about productivity. Maybe it's not about fairness.

Maybe the kingdom of God is not a business. Maybe God's vineyard, the church, is not intended to work like a well-oiled corporate machine. Maybe, in the Church, people come first, productivity comes second.

Maybe God's vineyard is meant to operate more like a family, where the newest members get ice cream, too, even if they haven't peeled their fair share of apples yet. Maybe God expects the church to be a messy and chaotic affair. Just like a family.

A few folks have been studying spiritual gifts with me every Wednesday night for a month or so. You'll get a chance to do the same study, if you join me in the sanctuary during the Sunday School hour in October.

Doing work we are called to do – gifted to do -- is a reward in itself. This is part of what Jesus is talking about in His story of the laborers in the vineyard.

Peter asks Jesus, “What then will we have [as a reward]?...we have left everything and followed you...” What's in it for us? What's the payoff?

Part of loving our work for God is to discover and to better understand the gifts God has given us for the work. If we are doing the work God has called us to do, for the good of the church, then we can work all day in the vineyard and we won't get burned out. We won't get resentful of others who show up late and who appear – to us, anyway – to do less work.

We will have our reward – the reward of doing meaningful, joyful work for God and for His kingdom. We may even, by the power of God -- over time -- learn to do productive work for God.

In this way, the crazy, familial chaos of the church might, ultimately be the most effective means of increasing the territory of God's kingdom. God may not be fair or productive by the world's standards, but His purposes will be fulfilled.

One last question: Is God generous?

III. Is God Generous?

We want to answer with an immediate and resounding “yes.” How could anyone say that God is not generous? Of all the attributes of God, generosity seems to be the most evident. We are abundantly blessed each day, just for the gift of breathing, of getting out of bed in the

morning, of seeing the sunshine and feeling a gentle breeze on our faces. Our God is a generous God.

But, man! – He sure seems to be more generous to the workers who come late than to the industrious early risers. He sure seems to be more generous to that undeserving person over there than He is to me with my measly life that I'm supposed to be grudgingly grateful for.

Joel D. Kline touches on this subject, in his book, When Things Just Don't Add Up:

“Some years ago The Christian Century included some reflections on this parable by a Congregational Church pastor named Anthony Robinson. Robinson writes of working hard in his garden throughout the spring and summer, only to discover that the most productive part of the garden was a surprise patch of pumpkins and zucchini he never knowingly planted, apparently the result of some seeds included in the compost haphazardly spread on the ground in early spring. It was a reminder that, in spite of all our hard work, so much of what comes our way in life has the quality of gift about it. We do not create it; it far exceeds our expectations.

“If our primary concern in life is limited to matters of fairness, we will frequently be disappointed. If we overlook the mystery in life and need to have things neatly explained, gratitude and graciousness will be edged out of our lives. Writes Robinson,

““When our only measure is fairness, when our preoccupation is our just desserts, we lose touch with a sense of grace and graciousness. We forget about the wild zucchinis, the people who love us more than we deserve, and the God who extends generosity and forgiveness to us.””

No matter how late a person comes to Jesus, God still blesses that person with the full abundance of His love and grace. The serious, long-time sinner, now past his prime, who looks back on a wasted life and feels such a depth of grief and remorse -- that person, too, receives the keys to the kingdom when he calls on the name of Christ Jesus. It is never too late – for the

church, for the individual person, for the world. Up until the last hour, when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead, each of us has the opportunity to receive “a full day’s pay,” 100% of the joy that God provides, on heaven and on earth.

Closing.

In our Old Testament reading today, the Hebrew children are wandering in the desert after being saved by God from slavery in Egypt. They are participating in their favorite pastime – complaining to God, complaining to Moses, complaining to Moses’ brother, Aaron – complaining, complaining, complaining.

“We’re hungry! We’re thirsty! We wish we could go back to being slaves in Egypt – at least they have food and water there!”

And out of a rock God brings forth a river of water in the desert.

And out of the sky God provides bread – manna from heaven.

God provides for us, in abundance. We complain. We moan and cry about life’s unfairness.

It’s OK to cry and moan and complain a bit. God is used to it.

And no matter how loudly we complain, God, out of His generous nature, provides us with every good thing. The riches of heaven are ours. Wild zucchinis and pumpkin surprises fill our gardens.

Some of us may think we don’t deserve such riches. Some of us may think our neighbor in the pew doesn’t deserve such riches. Some of us may think our immediate neighbors, living near our church buildings, don’t deserve such riches.

Nevertheless, says God, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

God's generosity is a mystery. God's generosity is totally unfair. God's generosity is abundant. God's generosity is available to you. Won't you open your heart and receive it today?

Amen.