

Why Is the Gospel Unfair?

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 03/22/20

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“It just isn’t fair! Mickey got to do it! Why not me?” Those are some of the words my parents would hear from me when I wanted to do something, but wasn’t allowed. And whatever reason mom or dad gave, it wasn’t usually very satisfying.

Maybe it was the wisdom gained from parenting my older brother. Maybe they decided to change their parenting style or philosophy. Whatever it was, I was the beneficiary of it.

If there is a story in the New Testament that underscores the unfairness of the gospel truth, this is it. Workers go into the fields at the landowner’s invitation; some at the beginning of the day, some at 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., or 5 p.m., and all of them are given the same wage.

“It’s not fair,” shout the early workers. And indeed on one level, they are right.

This is the stuff that leads to work stoppages. Human Resource department heads across the country are shaking their heads and offering advice to the landowner. In another era, the workers would be carrying picket signs and chanting about equal pay for equal work.

Now this parable is not a blueprint for labor practices or economic systems any more than the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a class on parenting. We all know that any company that paid people who work one hour a day the same as it paid full-time workers, would soon have a hard time finding employees willing to show up first thing in the morning.

Even so, this parable works on our imaginations in ways that have profound implications for the how we see God and our neighbors. It allows us to enter, for a moment, into an alternate world, one that operates on generosity rather than greed, ambition, and competition.

And right now, in a nation in which everything seems to be up in the air, it is good to take a look at things from a different angle.

It allows us to experience a world in which those who stand ignored, idle, and discarded by society are nevertheless of great value to God – worthy, regardless of their circumstances, to live with dignity each day. And it discloses the generosity that flows from the very person of God.

Just to the east of my hometown of Wisconsin Rapids were thousands of acres planted and irrigated by companies like DelMonte. Towns like Wautoma and Plainfield and Almond and Stevens Point, in the what’s called “The Central Sands” area of Wisconsin, are in center of this agricultural area.

A sociology class took a field trip to see the places where the migrant workers would come during the mid- to-late summer to pick the fields. They lived in desperate conditions. The farms had small groups of wood frame shacks, little if any indoor plumbing, electricity, or running water. I was not the only person who said, “That’s not fair.”

Fairness is of course in the eye of the beholder.

Perhaps in the end, the real message of Jesus’ parable, at least for those in worship here today, is that like the diligent all-day workers, many of us are blind to the privileges that we enjoy, And instead of acknowledging these privileges we become angry when someone else is given a daily wage, their daily bread.

One author has written that “the parable depicts a limited and false, form of justice. We can tell it is false justice because it produces envy and division, rather than wholeness and healed relationships.

Jesus’ disciples have and will soon again demonstrate their interest in securing places of status and prestige in the kingdom. They, too, like the workers in the vineyard, will splinter and become alienated. The parable is meant for them. It is a harsh reminder that there is no fairness, if we end up alone in the

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world.”

“The deep-seated, sense of fairness continues to wreak havoc upon the basic principles of freedom and justice for all. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard does exactly what Jesus’ parables are meant to do.” They shake up the way we look at our world, maybe a little bit more from Jesus’ point of view; maybe a little bit more from the point of view of our neighbors down the road.

And then they point us toward the possibilities of what we can yet become – it we are willing to live our lives from the direction of the Kingdom of God.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where the belief, “I got mine, you go fish” is the principal narrative. So much so that when folks get more than we think they deserve, we get angry, like the workers in the fields.

But perhaps the message of the parable for us today is not an accounting exercise. Maybe, instead, Jesus tells it to encourage our own generosity, acceptance, and gratitude for what we have and what we have been given. And perhaps that helps us to work for that reality for others. This way we can celebrate whenever there is food on the table, not just ours, and whenever there is opportunity for all.

God knows that in a world of coronavirus and all the other realities of the economy, we need that perspective.

In this way fairness is much more broadly defined and justice is a vision of God’s hope that all might have their daily wage, their daily bread. It isn’t easy. The temptations of comparison are with us every hour, but this is what we are called to do and be.