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November 17, 2013

Open Hands: Fairness and Faithfulness A Stewardship Meditation, Part II

Matthew 20:1-15 NRSV "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 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?' 7 They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 8 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.' 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 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.' 13 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? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'"

This morning, as we conclude our two-Sunday "Season of Stewardship" emphasis I want to invite you to think with me a moment about the concept of "fairness." **Fairness.** It's a concept that looks to be so simple but it's not. It gets used in a lot of ways, from the toddler's whining "*That's not fair*" to complicated philosophical discussions of the notion. Or take the sometimes contentious issue of whether state-run lotteries are fair or not. Some say that lotteries are "fair" because everyone has the same tiny chance of winning a multi-million dollar payout. Others, though, respond by saying that lotteries are not "fair" because, as one person has put it, they "*a tax on the*

mathematically illiterate.” But notice they’re talking past each other – the first person is talking statistical fairness and the second is raising the question of public policy fairness. And though we could talk all day about this, this morning let’s just focus on one meaning of the word: *fairness means getting what you deserve.*

But to get there, first consider this: I would contend that most folks really are, at heart, interested in **true** fairness (and not just some sort of *statistical* fairness), and it’s precisely because most folks do indeed want their fellow human beings to get a fair shake. But that belief is exactly why our scripture reading for today can seem so very puzzling. In fact, we may even find ourselves offended by Jesus’s parable. Why? Well, imagine the story in more contemporary terms. Suppose you have a job, say, working on a loading dock.. Eight or sometimes even nine or ten hard, hot, sweaty hours a day. Now, you’re paid decently; you don’t have any complaints about that. One day, though, there is an extra large shipment that must be dealt before day’s end. Early on it becomes clear that there just isn’t enough help to get the job done. So the foreman brings in some temps around noon. And then this happens a couple of more times: extra folks are brought in during the course of the afternoon. And finally the work is done, the endless parade of semis loaded and on their way. And as you’re getting ready to go home you see the foreman settling up with the temps. And you can’t help but notice that each of them – each and every one of them, from the ten-hour guys to the one-hour guys – are being paid **exactly** what you are being paid for your day’s work. Now wouldn’t you – in fact, wouldn’t **most** of us! – be a little bit angry, a little bit offended. I know I would be tempted to say exactly what those full-day workers said in Jesus’ parable: *“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.” (I once told the modernized version of this parable to another audience. And when I got to this point in the story, one man – who was clearly more and more agitated by the story – shouted out: *“I’d file a grievance with my union!”*)

This sense of puzzlement and perplexity – of being offended, even – is real. And it comes precisely from our sense of “fair play,” of what’s morally right. We **do** think that people ought not be treated in a way that denies them what they rightfully deserve. So, what in the world is Jesus trying to tell us with a story that seems so at odds with our sense of fairness and morality, so at odds with the God who we thought was supposed to be the One who is supremely just! Why would we worship such a God? Now, I think that if we are honest you and I tend to be offended by this parable because we identify with those who worked the longest. And I want to think that I therefore deserve something for that, that I therefore merit something from God’s fairness. How about you? Do you identify with the ones who worked the longest? After all, you might quietly think to yourself, aren’t you always there when the church doors are open, quietly doing the thousand and one things that are needed, sometimes doing work that no one else seems to want to do, making sure that things get done right?

But – do you begin to see? – that is exactly where the parable begins to make its powerful point against you and me. God’s kingdom, God’s realm, that Kingdom that Jesus announced and taught and embodied, ***is not a kingdom where we shall be overwhelmed with God’s fairness, but with God’s love.*** Let me say it again: the reign of God that Jesus announced is not a reign where you and I will be encompassed in fairness, but clothed, covered, and overwhelmed with love. With the coming of God

into our lives, all of us – the seemingly deserving and the seemingly not-so-deserving – will know that it is sheer goodness and not just mere fairness that has overwhelmed us.

Because when all is said and done, I think that this parable is trying to tell us three simple but powerful things about how your life and my life can be made freer and more joy-filled. First, our lives can indeed be changed if we focus on celebrating God's overwhelming, unexpected, unearned goodness rather than on demanding – even inadvertently – that God be absolutely "fair." How will that make a difference? Well, it can free us from so much unnecessary anxiety and worry. God is for us even when we don't deserve it, even when it's not "fair" that God be for us. God loves us even when we labor five minutes in the vineyard and even when we don't manage to do a very good job of even that. Now that is not to say that God doesn't also take delight in a job well done, in a life lived full of commitment to good and beautiful things, in those saints who love like there's no tomorrow. But it IS to say that those things don't make God love us. No, God loves because that is who God is.

Second, this very good news of God's unearned and unmerited love can allow us to be freed from the illusions you and I sometimes have about our own goodness. I don't know about you, but some of the actions that I do that are good sometimes have mixed motives. Sometimes that goodness is mixed up with fear. Sometimes those actions may have some resentment in them. Sometimes – if I'm really honest – I'm trying to show off just a little bit. Or sometimes the goodness that we are able to do is a function in many ways of the fact that we were raised in this family rather than in another one, or that we have the friends that we do, or that we have had the opportunities that we have had, or which side of a border we were lucky enough to be

born on. Just as there are no self-made Christians, there are no self-made good people. All of us who manage to be good and do good things are in debt to those in our paths who showed us how to be that kind of person! It also means that just as the good things in our lives are not based on some heavenly reward system for what we have earned in God's sight, in the same way we can be freed from the terrible idea that when hurt and misfortune come our way it must therefore be God who is causing us pain because we have earned it from him!

Third and finally, if we focus on celebrating God's overwhelming, unexpected, unearned goodness rather than on insisting on God's utter fairness, we can be freed to relate to others in a new kind of way. We might be able to transcend some of the "score-keeping" that can be a depressing and dispiriting part of our relationships. We might be able to transcend being jealous of those who are more fortunate in some way than we are, since we know that their good fortune is not a sign of God's disfavor toward us somehow but is just part of the reality of living in a complex world where, as the Psalmist put it, the rain does fall on the just and the unjust.

When I used to teach Philosophy of Religion courses in college, I sometimes used the following example to make the point about how the students might think about God: After one of the exams, I handed back the tests and had given every student an F. You can imagine the excitement this provoked. And someone, of course, would say, *"That's not fair!"* And I would respond that it was indeed fair since everybody had received exactly the same grade. What could be fairer than that? But then I'd take the exams back and at the next session I would hand them back with new grades, explaining that 20% of them had received A's, 20% B's, and so on, and that I had

decided which was which by random selection. Oh the cry that went up: *“That’s not fair!”* And, again, I responded, but what could be fairer than equally dividing the grades randomly among you? But, once again, I took the tests back and after the break announced that this time I’d graded them by throwing the exams down the stairs; the ones that landed on this stair got an A and the ones that landed on that stair got a B, and so on, so as to make all grades statistically have the same fair chance.

But by now they were on to me. And while none of them ever confused me with God, they had begun to realize from my little charade that if they insisted on God’s fairness to the exclusion of everything else they ran the risk of worrying all the time about how they were being evaluated, of what they deserved, of what the odds were. And that can be a cold and anxious way to live one’s faith. But if they focused on the grace of God, they could live differently, they could think differently, they could love differently. They could be overwhelmed by the possibility of grace and new life and could love and serve their fellow human beings with generosity.

This morning, in a few moments, we will have the opportunity to decide with our prayer and financial commitments for 2014 whether we too want to be overwhelmed by and embodied ourselves of God’s amazing generosity. We will have the opportunity to realize that indeed each and every one of us is indeed like those late-coming laborers in the vineyard – for the good things we have in our lives, the blessings of the folks who have been placed in our paths, the opportunities for good that have come our way, the unearned love that we have experienced are nothing you and I have deserved. It has not been fairness that has overwhelmed us, but indeed grace, amazing,

undeserved, unmerited grace. I don't know about you, but that fact has made me decide to increase my pledge this year so that the ministry that this church offers to those who so desperately need to know of such goodness can be enhanced. I don't know about you, but this morning the image in my mind is not so much on that toddler whining with fists closed about something's not being "fair," but on that same child of whatever age, face lit up with gratitude, hands extended in openness, thankful – so very thankful – that the song is not "Amazing Fairness," but "Amazing Grace" – for indeed we have been found, thanks be to God, we have been found by God's faithfulness. And now it is our turn, now it is our turn – with open hearts, and open minds, and most of all, open hands.