

The Children of Israel are on the move, having fled Egypt at the time of the Exodus, and now find themselves in the wilderness. Having been the subject of God's great mercy and been granted their freedom, they find themselves in an uncertain and unfamiliar world. Food and drink run short. They wonder if they would have been better to eat the bread of Egyptian slavery than die in the wilderness free, but famished. So they 'murmur', or grumble, ostensibly against Moses and Aaron, but in reality against God. How often is it the case among the people of God, then and now, that a crisis, whether one of daily need, or of physical suffering causes a crisis of faith? For most people their material and spiritual well-being is more closely linked than they would care to admit.

However God provides. There, in the wilderness, where death should have been expected, God offers life.

Exodus 16:2-15

16:2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

16:3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

16:4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

16:5 On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days."

16:6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt,

16:7 and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?"

16:8 And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him--what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD."

16:9 Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites,

'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'

16:10 And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

16:11 The LORD spoke to Moses and said,

16:12 "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

16:13 In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.

16:14 When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.

16:15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

*O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. **Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered, O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones. Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold, and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled. Egypt was glad when they departed, for dread of them had fallen upon it. He spread a cloud for a covering, and fire to give light by night. They asked, and he brought quails, and gave them food from heaven in abundance. He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it flowed through the desert like a river. For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant. So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing. He gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples, that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws. Praise the LORD!***

Paul, in prison, is in the eyes of the world in a place of failure and humiliation. Being Paul, he sees things differently. Prison was not a hindrance to his mission, but an enhancement. In what must have been a time of doubt and anxiety Paul holds on to his faith and declares his trust in God whatever happens. Often what we think is unfair takes us to the place where God wants us to be.

Philippians 1:21-30 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well- since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard, or possibly the parable of the gracious vineyard owner, needs little explanation in one sense. It tells us of God's radical and – for some – offensive grace. It is not a parable about a fair wage for a fair day's work or a handbook on workplace relationships. The parable is not about fair play, it is about God's grace, which does not rest on merit on long hours worked. The parable forces us to reflect on our response to the story. What do we think or feel towards the vineyard owner, and the workers who have borne the heat of the day as they worked, and the workers who were hired at the eleventh hour?

Matthew 20:1-16 "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."

“It’s Not Fair!” (Our response in the face of God’s generosity)

The highlight of my summer, by far, was my daughter’s wedding on Canada Day (that should be an easy anniversary to remember). All kinds of things were said at the reception for people to get an inner glimpse of the bride and groom. My son, the MC, went straight to the heart of his memory of his sister when he blurted out. “It’s not fair!” And that set the theme for almost everything that followed. Here is just a snippet of what he said: “It's not fair!”

Growing up with Naomi at the manse in Pictou, those are words I heard a lot. A lot.

“Kristelle stole my favourite shirt and wore it without asking and she's not even going to get in trouble? It's not fair!”

“Why does Jonathan get to stay out late and do whatever he wants? Why can't I? It's not fair.”

I'll leave out his references to Christmas and her response to it in her younger years but it wasn't always pretty!

I was the youngest growing up and I can sympathize with my own youngest child when she was remembered as the one who was always saying, “It’s not fair!” When you’re youngest, nothing is ever fair – not in what clothes you get, bedtime, riding in the front seat, the list is endless... and it’s not fair! And my son figured that out as he came to the end of his speech: Some of his final words: “A lot of these feelings and beliefs are just inherent in Naomi. I think that, whether she knows it, and whether or not she'll agree with me – I think that deep down in her big, beautiful heart, Naomi so desperately wants to believe the world is fair. Or at least that it should be. It ought to be fair.”

And I am right there with her and I want this world to be fair... and I want it to reward me, reward all, who work hard to make it fair and maybe do more than our share to ensure it is fair.

Talk about unfair. Last month a woman who lived an obscure existence for her entire life died in Truro... and a community remembered her for one thing – generosity. Yes, she and her husband won 11 million and, after providing a little to family and friends, gave away the rest – yes, all of it... to churches and community organizations. Old Barnes United got an amazing amount... this little church on the curve of the road... and it's not fair! Suddenly many of their worries and woes were gone. And **generosity** has ever so little to do with fairness and everything to do with **grace**. Matthew 20:15 “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” Back to the news story. Her name was Violet Large (no relation to Kathy as far as I know)... and her heart was as large as her name – Large - like the gifts she gave. And she was allowed to do as she chose with what was hers... and so many people and organizations blessed her and her husband... but not all. Some responded with a ‘It’s not fair!’

It’s not fair cries out the brother of the prodigal in one of Jesus’ best known parables. It’s not fair says Jonah when given a commission to go to Ninevah and preach God’s word, knowing full well that God is generous and forgiving to those who repent... and it certainly isn’t fair when his shade bush gets chomped on by a worm... it’s not fair!

Jesus knew the same, that life isn’t fair. And so he told a parable about it.

The parables of Jesus are masterpieces of human wisdom and divine character. He takes a common situation and tells a story we can remember. He puts heavenly meaning into earthly things. And we can all relate to it. This parable is no different.

The situation is common enough – an employer is hiring in the village square – day labourers are plentiful and cheap in the ancient Middle East. The vineyard owner hires men to help him at 4 different times during the 12 hour work day. Now this is a little strange. Especially the hiring at the 11th hour.

The first workers are promised a denarius, a typical day’s wage. The terms of the subsequent hirings are a bit vague, though. “whatever is right” will be what they are paid. Whatever is right translates to us as a percentage of a daily wage based on the hours worked, right? It’s so simple a child could work it out.

When payment time comes at the end of the day, those working longest begin to wonder – what will I be paid? They had hired on at the accepted wage of one denarius, a good and fair wage for that time and place. “Whatever is right!”

in their mind, was more than those latecomers. So when they received the same – they were upset. And we can relate to that feeling. It didn't seem fair. But after all, it was the agreement they made, it was the owner's money, and his right to pay others in line with his own sense of fairness.

Where is Jesus going with this parable? What does it mean? The church has most often seen this and many other parables as allegories. So the traditional way of saying what this parable means goes like this: Jesus' is talking about fairness in the kingdom of God - the vineyard, that is. God, of course, is the owner. And we are the workers. The primary question is... what kind of workers, and what is a fair price? It seems this parable raises many questions. Chief among them, "what is fair?" Let's ponder fairness today in light of God's work in Christ, and gain a deeper understanding of just how unfair – and just how fair – our God is.

Fairness is a concept we in North America are familiar with. From an early age, we learn what "fairness" is all about. Soon after the words "No!" and "Mine!", children learn that handy phrase, "It's not fair!". And we find ourselves echoing our own parents, "Who ever said life was fair?"

Still, we have an expectation that it will be! When someone cheats and gets ahead of us, we feel indignant. Slighted. It's not fair!

"I've been at this company for years, and that young upstart gets the promotion while I'm passed over? It's not fair."

"I'm a good parent. I really, really love my children. How come everyone else has perfect kids, and mine have all the problems? It's not fair!"

"I lived a good, clean, life. No smoking – I tried to eat well. And now the doctor says I have lung cancer. But my sister-in-law has smoked a pack a day for 40 years, and is just fine. It's not fair."

And, by the way, I hate line-ups. No matter which one I join, it immediately stops moving and I wait and wait and wait! It's not fair!

God Says, "You're right, it's NOT fair!" God is supremely unfair and supremely fair at the same time.

The bible says "God does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities". Some would say this is not fair. You might look at

the sinner over there and want God to punish him or her. You might expect that a fair and just God would mete out due punishment to those people. If God doesn't, it's not fair!

But if the bank error is in your favour, you are usually not the one to complain about it. I had a hard time convincing the check-out attendant that I had been undercharged for an item. Was the servant who came last to the field the one complaining about receiving an entire day's wage? No. It is the other servants who felt they deserved more – they spoke up.

Perhaps one lesson in this story is the great danger in comparing ourselves to others. We risk losing sight of our own faults and failings.

So which servant are you? Which one am I? Most of us have been part of the church all our lives and worked diligently for the cause of Christ – therefore we automatically connect with the first servants but maybe we should see ourselves, with humility, as that final servant – the one who deserves it least. We should all say with Paul, “I am chief of sinners”. For, in all fairness, none of us deserves the blessings God gives. Perhaps this is where the extension of the parable must end – for workers deserve a wage, but sinners deserve punishment, not grace. We deserve damnation not glory. Even our so-called “good work” is disgusting to God on its own. For us to receive a wage at ALL is definitely not fair.

So God is, in a sense, unfair. He is unfair to ‘us’, and that is something to be thankful for. Instead of ‘fair’, God is generous. It is all about grace which is completely and wholly undeserved. Fair – what on earth was ‘fair’ about the cross – the only one who was blameless before God became the one who died. And was this for himself?

So now, in Christ, we rightly claim a place in God's kingdom. We claim the inheritance of sons and daughters. We have, by Christ's work, an earned credit with God. His work on the cross, and his perfectly lived life – we get the credit for all that. Like the workers who slaved in the fields all day, and the latecomer benefits from their efforts – how much more do we latecomers benefit from the work of Christ? In fact we bring nothing to the table. We are beneficiaries of his “unfair fairness”. Reflecting on this parable of Jesus, we could say: In God's kingdom, life isn't fair. If it were, we would all be in deep trouble. But Jesus took what we deserved, and gave us what we don't. He satisfied God's sense of fairness, and brings us the wages of His death – which are eternal life, forgiveness, and peace. It's not fair! Thank God.

Conclusion

Bread raining down from heaven has nothing to do with fairness but of grace and generosity. Quail for everyone has nothing to do with survival of the fittest but with the outpouring of divine mercy and grace upon a people. We put a premium on fairness in our world, but God's view of fairness is much different from ours. But in Jesus Christ, God's sense of fair play is a true blessing to us.