

Worship Series: *Tell Us a Story*
Service Theme: *A Story of Perplexing Generosity*
Sermon Theme: *God Isn't Fair* (July 23, 2023)
Matthew 20:1-16

As a father of three children under the age of 8, I consider myself a bit of an expert on “fairness.” Because seemingly every day, at least one of my kids declares, “That’s not fair!” “He got 2 books at bedtime, but I only got one! That’s not fair!” “She got a birthday treat at school, but I didn’t get one. That’s not fair!” I had to take a nap this afternoon, but they didn’t. That’s not fair!”

Children often equate fairness with equality, right? It’s only fair if everyone gets the same. And while we chuckle at children’s insistence on fairness, are adults really any different? As the Women’s World Cup started this week, maybe you remember how the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team sued last year to receive equal compensation to their U.S. Men’s National Team counterparts. And be honest, if you discovered you were being paid less than a co-worker with the same position and same years of experience as you, wouldn’t you declare, “That’s not fair!” to your boss?

It’s part of human nature to want things to be fair. That’s especially true when we feel like we’re the ones who aren’t being treated fairly! Which is why the story Jesus tells us this morning might be a little surprising. Because in this parable—an earthly story with a heavenly meaning—Jesus makes it seem like **God Isn’t Fair.**

And for plenty of people, that’s a problem. They would agree that God isn’t fair, sometimes even refusing to believe that God is a good and loving God, or that God even exists because of it. “Why would a loving God allow bad things to happen to good people? Why would a good God allow good things to happen to bad people?” It might even leave us declaring, “That’s not fair!” But that’s exactly the point Jesus

is trying to make with this story--that God isn’t fair! Let’s dig into Jesus’ story to see what he means.

Jesus begins his parable, “*The kingdom of heaven is like...*” which basically means, “This is how things work when God is King.” He then visualizes God as an ancient Israelite vineyard owner. Very early in the morning, maybe 5 or 6am, this vineyard owner goes out into the marketplace, hires some day laborers to work in his vineyard, and sends them off to work with the agreed upon daily wage of a denarius--considered a very fair wage for a day’s work in Jesus’ time.

At 9am, the vineyard owner returns to the marketplace, and hires more laborers to work in his vineyard, promising, “*You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.*” He repeats that process at Noon, again at 3pm, and finally at 5pm, when he hires the last stragglers who’d spent the day doing nothing in the marketplace to work in his vineyard for one hour before quitting time.

As the workday ended, the owner instructed his foreman, “*Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.*” You can picture the long line of workers, snaking up to the foreman’s table. At the front of the line were the one-hour workers who had barely broken a sweat, and had no dirt under their fingernails, and at the back were the filthy, sweaty, smelly workers who’d just worked a 12-hour shift in the desert heat. That was a fitting order, as Jesus bookends the telling of this parable with the phrase, “*The last will be first, and the first will be last.*”

But once the foreman started handing out the wages, eyebrows raised. Those who’d only worked for an hour got a denarius, a full day’s wage, dropped into their palms. You can almost hear the excited murmur working its way back through the line. “If they got a denarius for just one hour, just think what he’ll give us!” But each worker in the line, from first to last, received the same: one denarius.

Then the excited murmur turned to discontented grumbling. The exhausted workers who’d just worked a 12-hour day complained to the vineyard owner, “*These who were hired last worked only one hour,*

and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” And we get it, right? Wouldn’t you also complain, “That’s not fair!” if you made the same amount of money as someone who worked 1/12th as much as you?

But while we understand their grumbling, they had no right to. How much had they agreed to work for? One denarius. And how much had they received? One denarius. As the vineyard owner responded, ***“I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”***

While people often declare, “Not fair!” when they don’t receive the same as everyone else, the workers in Jesus’ parable cried, “Not fair!” because everyone had received the same as them. As the 12-hour workers complained about the one-hour workers, ***“You have made them equal to us.”*** Even though they received what they’d earned, because they felt superior, they thought they deserved so much more than people like that.

Now, apply Jesus’ parable to our lives. Do you ever have similar thoughts or feelings? When you suffer some physical, mental, or emotional challenge, or life doesn’t follow your plans, do you shake a fist at God, demanding, “How could you let this happen to me?” Does it make you angry to see wicked, unbelieving people live long, prosperous lives, while a faithful Christian dies at 40 after decades of struggle? If a drunk driver who killed your child repented and trusted in Jesus as their Savior, would it enrage you to picture them in Heaven at Jesus’ side, alongside your child? I once heard a pastor’s story about a young woman with short, pink, spiky hair who came to his church for the first time, only to have an older member inform her before the service, “Our church isn’t for your type of people.” If someone who’s very different from you, or who sins differently than you comes to hear about their Savior, do you want to make them feel like they don’t belong with people like you? Don’t such words or feelings come from

an attitude that God owes us big time for believing in and serving him? An attitude that other people haven’t earned the things God gives them like we have? Like crabby kids with crossed arms and pouty lips declaring, “That’s not fair!”

That’s exactly how Jonah felt in today’s first reading. He was angry that God forgave the repentant Assyrians in Nineveh-- wicked, unbelieving enemies of God’s people-- instead of destroying them. Because Jonah didn’t feel like they deserved such grace from God, like he did! And maybe we feel the same way sometimes about people who have hurt us, or live a different lifestyle from us, or who vote for the opposite political party as us. That we deserve better than them, otherwise God isn’t fair.

And my friends, you’re absolutely right. As Jesus’ parable illustrates, God isn’t fair. But Jesus doesn’t tell you that story to irk you, or driving you away from him. He tells us that story to help us understand that God’s lack of fairness...is the best thing that’s ever happened to us! Because God isn’t fair in two ways: **1.) He doesn’t give us what we deserve.** That God’s mercy. And **2.) He gives us what we don’t deserve.** That’s God’s grace. And as a Christian, the foremost recipients of God’s unfair mercy and grace...is us!

At least the workers in Jesus’ parable had done some work to earn their promised wages. The Bible makes clear that we haven’t done anything to deserve anything from God. As Paul writes in Romans, ***“The wages of sin is death.”*** Eternal death, that’s the wages we’ve earned for ourselves! And for those who think they’ve been pretty good people that have earned some brownie points from God, hear James write, ***“Whoever keeps the whole law yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”*** As Paul writes in Ephesians, on our own, ***“you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”*** Or as the prophet Isaiah writes, ***“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”*** If we think we’ve earned anything from God, then we’re like day laborers sitting in the marketplace doing nothing all day, and expecting to get paid! If God was fair, then you and I would leave empty handed, because we

haven't deserved anything from him. In fact, if God was fair and gave us what we deserve, then we'd receive nothing but eternal death and separation from God in Hell.

But thanks be to God that he isn't fair. He's merciful—not giving us what we deserve. He's gracious—giving us what we don't deserve! Instead, God willingly experiences the greatest “unfairness” imaginable. The perfect, sinless Son of God taking the suffering, death, and Hell that we deserve, and taking it on himself. That's not fair! Exactly. But it's merciful. The perfect, sinless Son of God covering our sinful, undeserving, trainwreck lives with his perfect, sinless life. That's not fair! Exactly. But it's gracious! As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, ***“God made him who had no sin (Jesus) to be sin for us, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.”*** That's not fair! Exactly. But it's exactly what we needed!

As theologian John Stott wrote in his book, *The Cross of Christ*, ***“The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We...put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God...puts himself where we deserve to be.”*** God isn't fair. He's gracious, and merciful, exactly what we need him to be for sinners like us!

And the implications of that good news are seismic in our lives! Obviously because through faith in that merciful, gracious God who saved us in Jesus we have eternal life. But it's also earth-shattering for our earthly problems too! If God loves us so much that he was willing to graciously give us what we don't deserve, and to mercifully not give us what we do deserve, do we really have to worry that he doesn't have our best interests in mind, no matter what challenges we're facing or suffering in our lives—even when it doesn't seem “fair” to us? As I mentioned in the intro, almost daily one of my kids says something's “not fair.” But how often as parents do we realize that what seems unfair to our kids is actually what we know is best for them? How much more can we have that confidence in the all-powerful, all-knowing God who is the “landowner” of everyone and everything in the universe?

And it means that when we experience unfair treatment from people—parents, spouses, employers, whoever—it doesn't need to bother or break us. Ultimately, what does it matter when we have eternal life won for us by our “unfair” God? Ultimately, what does it matter when God promises that when he returns on Judgment Day, full and complete justice will be made for all of the unfair, unjust treatment we've received!

And it means that there is no one you'll meet in this world who is unworthy or less deserving of God's love, grace, and mercy than you, and therefore, we can joyfully show such love, grace, and mercy to others, because that's what we've received from God!

The Gospel implications of having a gracious God who gives us what we don't deserve, and a merciful God who doesn't give us what we deserve are immense! My friends, God isn't fair. Thank God! Because that's the best news for sinners like us.