

TEXT: Matthew 20:1-16
THEME: The Lord is gracious and merciful
SUBJECT: Generosity
TITLE: Fair

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
24 September 2017
Messiah Moravian
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From each according to her/his ability, to each according to her/his need. Each laborer is paid a day's wage whether they worked 12 hours or 1, because a day's wage was necessary to sustain one's family for the day. Maybe the kingdom of heaven is more like socialism, communism even, than capitalism.

I worked my way through college, literally. I worked 16-20 hours a week during the school year and full time in the summer. I worked a 3-11 shift at a state hospital during my seminary years and for a few months an 11-7 shift at a steel mill. I didn't particularly like any of these jobs. I worked so I could go to school. If any of my coworkers would have been paid the same amount of money I was paid for working 1/12 the time, I would have complained bitterly.

When my friend's seven year old daughter complained, "That isn't fair." he would respond, "Fair is for fairy tales." Maybe so, but I agree with the business owner who, after hearing this gospel lesson read said to the preacher on the way out the door, "That would be the last day that vineyard owner would have anyone work for him." Perhaps, or everyone would show up at 5:00 pm the next day.

Let's remember that this is a parable. The kingdom of heaven is like . . . It is not a vineyard whose grapes need picking before they rot. The vineyard is the human family and the work is to love God and neighbor as oneself. Yes, love is work. The pay, the reward for doing love's work is love, whether one works 12 hours or 1. Yes, love is all there is.

If you were born into a loving family, if you were taught to love from an early age, if you engaged in love's demanding and sometimes maddening work from the rising of the sun to its setting, would you be envious of someone who only learned to love as the sun set upon her life? Would you complain to God, "It isn't fair that she should reap love's reward at the end of the day when she has only done love's work for one hour?"

Well, Jonah did. Jonah served God all his life and God sends Jonah to warn his bitterest enemies of impending doom unless they change their ways. Jonah doesn't want to warn his enemies because he knows that if they heed the warning, God will repent of the disaster he planned for them and spare them. Jonah knows God is gracious and merciful. After all, God did spare Jonah from drowning in a most unusual and spectacular way.

Jonah believes God's generosity should extend to Jews only. Jonah harbors a narrowly nationalistic vindictiveness that desires the death of his enemies. Jonah would rather die than see his enemies be loved and experience the grace and mercy of God. Jonah

is reminded that his enemies are God's creatures too. Jonah may have no investment in their well being but God does.

The laborers who started work at 6:00 am are like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son. They imagine those who started work at 5:00 pm spent the day in the bar playing poker, singing, drinking, living it up, being irresponsible. The image of the younger brother spending all his money on wine, women and whatever tickled his fancy, comes solely from the envious imagination of the older brother.

We do not know the reality of the younger brother's life in the far country. All we know is whatever life he led did not lead to his heart's content; it led him to return to the home of a loving father.

The life you have lived in the envious imagination of your enemies exceeds anything you have experienced. A feeling of discontent and ill will aroused by another person's perceived advantages causes us to complain when the prodigal returns, "It isn't fair that a fatted calf should be slaughtered for him when I have never even had goat stew."

A burly man, age around 30, attending a parish family retreat weekend, explained he had been married about two years and felt he'd received the most fabulous gift in the world. It was clear he wasn't a high achiever or high earner or high anything much. But you couldn't match his smile. His wife looked pretty happy too. There wasn't a hint of boasting: there was just effervescent joy. You don't forget such a smile.

Later in the weekend another man, haunted by that smile, confronted the retreat leader. This man seemed extremely restless and staccato of speech. He needed to share, so the retreat leader said to him, "Go on, let it all out." What came out was this: "I hate that man for having what I don't have. It feels so unfair - I'm attractive, I'm kind, I'm hard-working, I'm not a womanizer - so why can't I smile with that kind of joy?"

Life isn't fair. The birth lottery isn't fair. It is easy to understand how someone born a Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar would be envious of someone born to the British royal family. It is easy to understand how someone born in the poverty and violence of the south side of Chicago would be envious of someone born a Buffet, a Gates, a Zuckerberg.

But that is not what our parable is about. It is about someone born into privilege and power and more possessions than can be numbered being envious of the most disadvantaged. The parable is about the privileged person complaining, "It isn't fair!" when the disadvantaged person receives some unearned benefit.

Jonah would rather die than see Nineveh saved. How hard-hearted and mean-spirited we become when envy possesses our imaginations. When Jonah complains, "It isn't fair." God responds: "Have I not a right to be concerned about those who do not know their right hand from their left, who are my children just as you are? Have I not a right to do what I want with what is mine?"

