

## **Courage & Kin-dom**

### **Title: Fairness in the Eyes of the Gospel**

**Preached on March 5, 2023**

**+ Gospel Reading**

*Matthew 20:1-16*

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New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

“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 a denarius for the day, 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 a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 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 a denarius? 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.”

Today we read the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. I'd say its one of the more easier parables to preach on, although it still led me to a lot of questioning and pondering. This landowner who hires these laborers is unusual for a lot of reasons. First, usually it's the manager that goes out and hire workers for the day, not the landowner. And this landowner goes out multiple times in the day. There's early in the morning when he hires his first workers, and then he goes out at 9 am and hires more with the agreement that he will pay whatever is right, and then he goes out again at noon and 3 pm and at 5pm, when the day is almost over, he hires more. Why? Because they say they've been waiting all day for someone to hire them.

I don't blame these early morning laborers. They are bone-tired, they have blisters on their hands, sunburn on their skin, they worked hard for their money, and here are these workers who

have been working only an hour, and they are getting paid the same.

And it doesn't seem to matter that indeed these early morning laborers agreed with the landowner that morning on being paid a denarius for a day. They forget all of this in the anger of others being paid the same amount for less work. They are angry at how generous the landowner is to others.

This passage violates what is believed to be traditionally fair in society: the more hours you work, the more you get paid. There is no wage per hour in this passage. No, it's actually to your advantage in this passage if you show up to work late. And the landowner's choice is so opposite to our capitalistic society, where working a ton of hours gives you honor and prestige, and working too few hours gives you side eyed looks and complaints. And we

feel those side eyes glances and even rage from those laborers who worked more hours yet got paid the same.

And reading this passage, it gives you whiplash because the world we live in runs by the rule of getting paid for the hours you work. Fairness is looked upon as a positive value in our world. And now God is telling us to throw that rule out the window?

Fairness is such an interesting concept to me. Fairness is our attempt at creating rules that ensure everyone has an equal playing field in life. Fairness is a structure in our lives that tries to eliminate bias.

For one thing, fairness is tremendously important for kids. When you're playing games at school as a kid, there are rules in place to ensure everyone gets a turn. There are countless sibling rivalries out there when one sibling has more of something than another.

To this day, I have a visceral reaction when someone wants to eat my food off my plate, especially if they don't order anything because they claim they "aren't" hungry, and that is based on how much forced sharing happened when I was a kid, one of six children. It wasn't fair, I would say.

And when you're volunteering at Vacation Bible School, you want to ensure that you have enough of a snack for each child or you will have big feelings happen.

One of the reasons kids are so attuned to fairness is that they know they don't have as much control, power or leverage as their parents or other adults. And so they cling to one of the rules they know adults value: fairness. And when that fairness is violated, you see heartbreak in their eyes.

But in my reflecting on this text this week, I've heard the Spirit say, I don't think fairness serves us well. Which surprised me – because I've always valued fairness. But let me explain.

One way it doesn't serve us well is **fairness often replaces human worth as the priority in a situation.**

Think about it.

When we are in a situation where we feel we are treated unfairly, we don't say 'I am a human being created in God's image, deserving of good things and made of good, and I deserve to be treated well ... We say, treat me better not because I deserve it, but because that's not fair. Why? Because our own innate worth doesn't seem to matter as much as fairness in this world.

Depending on who we're talking to, we know fairness is more important to them than our worth.

## **Fairness makes us forget about relationship.**

Yes, relationship and community, one of the concepts that Jesus preaches on again and again. Just last week we read scripture that emphasized healing wounds in a community. We need each other. We are not meant to function alone, but in community. It can be frustrating, it can slow things down,

But fairness makes us forget all about that.

Just this past week, I saw on Instagram a picture of a lit up highway sign that read “it’s a lane not a birthright, let them merge.” There’s something about driving in your car that makes you forget the people driving next to you are human beings who have dignity and worth. And when you’re driving and running late and someone puts their signal on to get in front of you, you find



yourself getting frustrated. Or when it's clear they're unfamiliar with that particular part of 25 near 209A/209B leading onto 6 west that always has a long traffic jam, and they put their signal on but keep driving past a line of cars, you don't want to let them in because that's not fair. They should have known...somehow. When I take the lightrail to work on snowy days, I am so much more attuned to the humanity of those around me than when I'm driving in my car.

I imagine that the laborers didn't know the other laborers very well, didn't know the challenges that they faced, how much they worried all day in the marketplace wondering how they would make money to buy their family food. For the sake of fairness, those angry laborers just see those receiving generosity as a threat.

Why do we become threatened when goodness comes to others? Because we aren't valuing them as people, but valuing our

fairness. Insisting on fairness can make us greedy people. Just like me not wanting to share my food with someone else, I'm not being generous with others.

**And fairness has a tendency to make us forget that other people's needs may be different from ours.** We think we're creating a level playing field, we think we're promoting equality, but we aren't considering that we don't all have the same needs.

Perhaps you've seen the illustration of reality, equality, and equity. You have three people trying to watch a ball game and there's a fence. One person is standing on a few boxes and can see over the fence, while the others have no boxes to stand on and can't see, representing that some of us have privileges that others' don't. Perhaps we can imagine such privileges as generational wealth, being able to go to college, being born in a country and not

having to flee because of war and violence, being able to afford health care and medications, not facing racism each day where strangers assume you are violent and a threat. And these privileges make life very different for each one of us.

Opportunities come much easier for those of us with these privileges. This illustration is called reality.

And then the illustration titled equality, which is the assumption that we each benefit from the exact same support. Each person is standing on a box that is the same height. However, some are shorter than others and still can't see over the fence. Someone in a wheelchair can't even get on the box. So we've assumed wrong. Some need different support.

Then you see the illustration called "equity." Each person has a different number of boxes to stand on based on what they need. If you're shorter, you have more boxes. The person in a wheelchair

has a ramp up onto a big box. All are the same height and can see over the fence.

And finally, an illustration called justice, where the fence has disappeared. There is no barrier any longer. It is justice that takes our differences into account, including our advantages and disadvantages.

There is no one size fits all solution for everyone. Each person faces different hardships, and trying to be fair and give everyone the same solution is not just or right.

So what do we do? This concept that has a strong hold on our world is something that can be a hinderance to the Gospel that

God proclaims. We are fighting a strong current in this world. A current made of limited funds, logic, profits, efficiency and limited time where we feel like we have to use fairness just to get things done faster, or not spend as many resources. I get that. Fairness is often our default

But dream with me. In this congregational discernment process we are in, we want your gospel dreams. Allow yourself to dream in this moment. Kimberly Wagner, preaching professor at Princeton Theological Seminary says “this parable invites us towards renewed and reinvigorated holy imagination.”<sup>1</sup>

Here's my holy dream. What if we could create a world where people did not have to insist on fairness just to survive? What if we created a world where we trusted in the divine fingerprint

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/laborers-in-the-vineyard-2/commentary-on-matthew-201-16-8>

within each person, and treated them with dignity and worth?

What if we lavished generosity on them not because they've earned our love, but because God calls us to?

I know some of you may be internally rolling your eyes at me, saying it's unrealistic and naïve. But it's a gospel dream!! It's from our scriptures!! And Calvary – I HAVE to keep dreaming of a better world. I am not satisfied with the one we are living in now, and God calls me to keep prophetically dreaming of a more gospel-filled world. Sometimes that's the only thing that keeps me going.

Why do I have this dream? God as this landowner is always searching for those who need a place to belong, searching for those who have a need, of any kind. This landowner found

laborers still standing around at 5pm who needed work. And God hired them and paid them generously.

God doesn't have a limited guest list, a staff list, God doesn't draw up contracts for each one of us that say if we fulfill certain job requirements, only then we will be rewarded with x amount of blessings. Nope. God sees a need of ours and strives to meet it. It does not matter if we deserve it or not. And God asks us to do the same for others - to see the need in the world and strive to meet it.

Some of you may have grown up with a theology or one that you still have, a theology that teaches you earn your salvation with your good deeds, that God is an evaluator, keeping tabs on you, and you were or are always wondering if you're enough in God's eyes. It's a system very much based on fairness, and a system that assumes that we are all in the same place with access to the same resources. Or perhaps you live with this theology because you've

been harmed greatly in life, and you just can't bear the idea that God loves your abuser.

One thing I notice is that those who wonder if they're good enough in God's eyes, who struggle with God loving us no matter what, that those people often struggle to extend generosity to others. Their image of who God is dictates who they extend the gospel to.

But I am here to tell you that God is not an evaluator who keeps a spreadsheet of all human beings on Earth, and each time we do something good we get a point, and when we're sinning, we get a point deducted. Nope – God is the farthest thing from a capitalistic machine.



No, God is exceedingly generous. God gives us grace upon grace. God hopes for healing for us and loves us towards healing. And God cries when we are far from God. I think we are punished not by a wrathful God but by the life we lead when we are far from God. God cries when we are living lives of sin that extracts the life out of us. I think of the parable of the prodigal son, and the father who rejoices because his son who was once dead is now alive.

God and Jesus and your pastors proclaim a message that makes no sense to the rational, profit-driven secular world - that God loves you for exactly who you are, that God sees your needs, that God gives us generosity that we do not deserve (and that is exactly the point), and God asks us to do the same.

Our call is to live in this secular world that values fairness, logic, efficiency and profit, and still remember the Gospel. To remember that we worship a very generous God, and God asks us to be

generous as well. Our high calling is to see the world full of need, and be willing to take small steps to help address that need. Our high calling is to know that some need more or different kinds of help than others. And our high calling is to resist that temptation to dismiss others and their need, simply because addressing it would take too much time and be too complex.

The amazing good news is that our worth in God's kingdom could never be earned. God's love is not based on fairness, whether we deserve it or not. We need it, we always do – and that's what God sees.