

Pulpit Exchange, September 24, 2017 (Lowell)

It's Not Fair!

How many times has that expression been uttered in your hearing? I know it was a refrain I often heard as my children grew up—whether the issue was an activity they weren't allowed to join that **all** their friend were attending or an object that **everyone** else had. This often happened when our son, because he was almost four years older, got to go or do something that his sister was not allowed to do. My husband would point out that the county fair only came once a year and it wasn't open now. That response never pleased the one voicing the complaint. My mother, if present, would remind me how often that phrase came out of my mouth as well. Of course, children are not the only ones looking around them and deciding that something that they see is not fair. Sometimes the expression gets vocalized; as adults, more often it is we only think it. For some reason we seem to have an internal gauge which makes these judgments about a lot of things which happen in our lives. We place them on a scale of sorts—fairness is a measure we hold up—as if all things should be balanced and fair. We often equate fairness with justice in our minds. Yet we most often verbalize this feeling when we think that we have received less than someone else; our share is not what it should be based on what we know about ourselves and the other. When I read today's passage—honestly, did you not sympathize with the ones who had arrived in the vineyard early? The story of these workers in the vineyard is probably one of the most discomforting parables Jesus ever told—just because we understand exactly why those workers are grumbling. The parable begins in the vineyards of Palestine. If you were there you would find that this is about the time that the grapes are ripening. The ripening happens rapidly and the grapes need to be harvested quickly before the fall rains begin. It's a race against time. Traditionally a corner of the village town square functioned as an informal place for those seeking work to gather. This practice still goes on—there are corners where those seeking day labor positions gather and those in construction come seeking to hire labor just for the day. In our passage, Jesus describes a landowner who needs workers for his vineyard so he goes out early in the morning seeking to hire workers. He comes to an agreement with some and hires them at the usual daily wage. We aren't told how many he hires on this first trip, but evidently he later feels that that number is not sufficient, for some reason he wishes to hire more workers. So he goes back about nine, then again at noon, then again at three and makes a final trip at five where he engages some more workers who are still there seeking employment. Except for the first group where a specific wage is mentioned, the landowner tells those he hires that he will pay whatever is right. Up until this point at the end of the day everything is proceeding according to what is customary. The landowner continues to hire workers until the end of the day as he desires for his crop to be harvested. We aren't told why the landowner didn't hire the number of workers he needed right from the first. Perhaps as the day wore on he noticed the vines were more fruitful than expected...We don't know his reasoning, and evidently the first workers had no complaints until the wages started being handed out—beginning with those who came last to the field. Now we have a problem. Those who are hired last, who evidently worked only one hour, are given the same wage that those who were hired first agreed to for their work—the usual daily wage. When those who labored from early morning until the end of the day

receive their pay check—it is also the usual daily wage. Can't you just imagine the scene—That five o'clock crew, working only an hour in the cool of the early evening, is walking away looking at their surprisingly fat pay-checks, glancing at each other and under their breath saying Wow! That early morning crew that has worked about twelve hours in the heat are standing there hot, tired, sweaty and indignant. "It's not fair!" they exclaim and want an explanation. They have gotten what they agreed to work for, but suddenly, seeing what the others received—"It's not fair!" The landowner's response is simple: "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 gave to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" What can we say to that, but yes, the landowner is allowed to act this way? Yet still we hear the refrain: "It's not fair!" This is a multi-leveled, strategically disconcerting parable. It was meant to discomfort. I am sure it did then; it still does now. The landowner stands for God of course; we're the workers. The vineyard is the world, or maybe the kingdom, or perhaps the church. The story suggests that God loves and blesses us all in a way that's beyond fair. We don't deserve any of it—not the stuff, not the love, not even life itself. We don't exactly **deserve** anything. All is gift; all is grace. Thus it is true in a fundamental way; that often used quotation that life's not fair. Actually, when we speak of God's ways, what we speak of is more than fair. God's not fair. Actually God is more than fair. So at one level, this parable is about God—the extravagant love and generosity of God who loves and showers blessings whether we deserve it or not. At another level, the parable is about us—human beings and how we respond to this blessing, how we respond to the unmerited love and grace, acceptance and bounty given to us. The specific human response we hear in this parable is, of course, complaint—the whining of those all day workers who got everything they expected but clamor like aggrieved children that "It's not fair!" The landowner seems to hit the nail on the head with his closing statement: "Or are you envious because I am generous?" It's not exactly justice that the all-day workers desire for they receive what they agreed to gain from their work. That is justice. The truth is that they are simply envious because the late-in-the-day workers got such a sweet deal. You can now google quotes by almost any famous person. One I found that seems appropriate here is one by Theodore Roosevelt: "Comparison is the thief of joy." That seems to be a fundamental truth about our nature. Those workers who arrived early and worked all day for the wage to which they agreed were not unhappy at first when they saw the late arrivals getting that same wage. However, because that internal sense of "fairness" came into play, their expectation was that they would now receive more. When they didn't get the more, they became unhappy, dissatisfied with what they received. The portion of this parable about the unbelievably generous landowner presents a situation where the landowner's generosity is offensive—at least that's the way that it seems to those who worked the longest on that day. The point which we need to keep in mind is that we can also easily get trapped by our own patterns of counting and assessing and evaluating. We can altogether miss God's generosity. Perhaps in this parable those initial workers are disappointed because of their assumption that they would receive more because of the generosity of the landowner to those who worked less. Or perhaps, if we look at what they actually said, there might be something else involved. Verse 12: "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." Perhaps they are just angry that the playing field has been leveled, that there is now no way to distinguish

their efforts from those who worked much less, and that everyone is suddenly treated the same. How, after all, do you know who you are and where you stand, if you are not compared—whether favorably or unfavorably—with others? And that seems to be a basic truth of human life. We desperately want and need to be in relationship with each other, relationships that are equal, healthful and guided by love and respect. Yet we can seem to make no sense of our own lives and have no standard by which to measure our own worth apart from comparing ourselves to others. And so we do this all the time. We validate our existence on the backs of others, comparing our works, our achievements to those around us. In response, God sends God's own Son to demonstrate once and for all that we need no measure, that God has established us as beloved by divine decree, and that God's mercy and goodness—God's generosity—extends to all, including you and me and those whom we perceive as less deserving. We are often trapped by our own need to compare, and surprised and perhaps somewhat suspicious about this profound, inclusive embrace of God. After all, nothing else in life is like this! So our response is that we are often offended by God's invitation to all. We refuse to give up the false security that we control our own destinies through our works. This parable is not just a story—it is a window into the human soul. Thank goodness it is also a window into the life and mystery of God, who will finally not surrender to our self-destructive ways, but has sent and raised God's own Son to life and grants mercy and generosity to all through God's own love and generosity. Thanks be to God for our unmerited blessings.