

Eighteenth after Pentecost
September 21, 2014
Barrhaven United Church

Exodus 16: 2-15
Matthew 20: 1-16

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God's Fairness

George tells of an experience of lunching with a couple of union reps and their lawyer when they were trying to settle a labour dispute where the issue was seniority. He got reflective: it reminded him of this parable. He said it out loud. I'm glad he's still here. Both texts this morning are about fairness. Our ideas of fairness contrasted with God's fairness. They challenge our everyday notions of what is fair.

Fairness is one of the first things we identify as children. I think little kids know what's fair and unfair right after they learn the word "no" and the power it has to completely stymie the grown up world around them. Fairness is deeply ingrained.

In the Exodus story of manna and quails, God responds graciously to complaints and grumbling. Not at all what I was taught as a child. No whinging! They are whinging about this impossible journey - a journey to freedom and self determination. They complain that they could have stayed behind around the fleshpots of Egypt and been well fed and much better off than they are now.

God gives them what they need. Everyone collects as much manna - a word that actually means "what is it?" - as they can and everyone has what they need for today - no matter how many in their household. God's fairness: we get what we need.

Jesus' parable is more pointed. The owner goes to the town square to hire labourers at dawn, and again at nine, noon, three and an hour before sunset. At the end of the day he pays each one the same amount no matter how long they've worked.

Now this is simply unfair. We know that. As Mary pointed out in bible study if the landowner had simply paid the workers in the order in which he hired them they wouldn't know the difference. True, but we'd have no story she added. So what are we to make of it?

The majority of the population were landless peasants who were destitute and on the edge of starvation. This story has that fact in its background by identifying a landowner and idle men who wait in the town square hoping to be hired to work for a day. We have this still. Not just foreign migrant workers. Downtown in any city in the western world. We have all seen pictures of those hopeless, hungry faces. Well, that exact same thing is happening in this parable.

Behind every man in the line is a needy, desperate family. The story identifies that fact by saying that they are paid a denarius at the end of the day. It was the custom to pay casual labourers at the end of the day, before sunset and the obligatory prayers. And the coin, the denarius, was enough to feed one family for one day. So the day's wage is enough to ensure that the family will not go hungry that night.

God's fairness. It challenges the conventional wisdom that you get what you deserve, you get what you earned. If that were true, those hired last would get one hour's pay - one twelfth of the day's wage. But the story says that each worker got what they needed - enough to feed their family.

In God's realm, in God's world, in God's kingdom, we get what we need. In God's kingdom everybody, and I do mean everybody - the deserving and the undeserving, the good and the bad, the prudent and the lazy, the respectful and the whingers - everybody gets what they need.

And what does that mean for us? Well, for starters, it means that living a faithful God-following life doesn't mean we can expect some reward, heavenly recognition. That normal human expectation is not part of God's economy. In God's common-wealth, God's bounty, grace and love are gifts, bestowed freely, not according to some divine accounting ledger, but simply because we need them.

Jesus told parables to answer the question: what is the realm of God like? It would be easy to say - well if the kingdom was here we could live like this. The message is a challenge. It challenges us to live like this because every time we do, even a little, God's realm, God's commonwealth appears. We make it present by our actions.

God calls us to treat everyone fairly - not by human standards - by God's standard. That means that in our everyday ordinary world, we are asked to ensure that everyone has what they need for living. Food, shelter, clothing, safety. Also work, education for their children, care for their elderly and sick, and beauty. Everyone needs some beauty in their lives.

The parables are beautiful. They don't moralize or judge. They just tell a story. The power of the story is its challenge to examine ourselves and change our perspective. It's normal to identify with the workers who started early and who laboured through the heat of the day. Yet the parable asks us to see God's perspective. It challenges our very human reaction that it isn't fair. Jesus uses our feelings of unfairness, the feeling of envy to introduce another world, one that is drastically different from ours, the kingdom of heaven.

God's project is simple: to be gracious to all, far more gracious than we can imagine. God intends goodness, abundance, beauty, and boundless love for all creation. Our job as the people of God, is to notice glimmers of that vision, and get with the project of assisting that world into being. When we catch this vision, we can begin to transform ourselves and our way of living.

God's viewpoint is generosity and abundance. Knowing this can move us from seeing the world as one of scarcity and competition, where the appropriate response is anxiety and envy, to seeing the world filled with abundance and enjoyment. God wants abundance and enjoyment for us. Seeing through eyes of faith means seeing where we can create abundance and joy for others. And that increases our own and creates the kingdom.

We don't get what we deserve, thank God: we get what we need. As those great theologians, the Rolling Stones sing: "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need." Amen.

c 2014, Suzanne E. Sykes