



September 21, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 20:1-16

“God Isn’t Fair”

Once there was a man, we’ll call him Tom, who loved soccer. Every now and then he had the chance to go see an indoor soccer game, but not that often. One night he got a call from a neighbor who knew of his passion. “Listen, I had a couple tickets to the indoor soccer game coming up next weekend, but my son’s wife just went into the hospital for emergency surgery. We’re leaving tonight for Springfield, where they live. I knew you could probably use the tickets- can I bring them over?”

Tom expressed his concern for his friend’s daughter-in-law, but also jumped at the offer of the tickets. Tom’s wife wasn’t a sports fan, so Tom asked his 12 year old son if he’d like to go with him to the game. Jeremy was ecstatic--- he’d played on a local park district soccer team for 5 years and loved it. His dad proposed a deal: Jeremy was to clean up the storage room in the basement, and he could go with his dad to the game.

Jeremy went to work immediately. He worked after school for the next three days, doing his homework after dinner. Friday he put the finishing touches on the basement, then showered and changed and sat waiting for Tom to arrive home from work. They would be stopping for burgers before heading to the game.

When Tom arrived he came into the house with a big grin on his face. Jeremy leaped up and asked, “Ready to go??” Tom smiled and said, “Give me a minute to change first- and I need to talk to your sister. Is April around?”

April, age 8, came running into the kitchen to give her dad a hug. “Guess what, honey?” he grinned, “You won’t believe this, but I got another ticket to the game

tonight. That means you can come with us, if you want.” April, who had played soccer one season just that fall, squealed and bounced around. “Oh, I’ll go get ready right away!” She raced off.

Tom caught his son’s eye and suddenly realized the delight was not unanimous. “Dad, that’s not fair! You said I could go with you only if I cleaned the storage room!”

“I know, son, I thought of that- so April is going to have to sweep out the garage tomorrow morning.”

“But that’s not fair! That job might take her half an hour- or an hour at the most! I spent at least five hours cleaning the storage room!”

Tom put an arm around his son’s shoulders. “Jeremy, I’ve got the ticket. I want April to have it. You know as well as I do how much she’d like to go. And she isn’t old enough to do as hard a job yet. I’m giving her the ticket and inviting her to come with us.”

That’s not fair. How many times have we felt that, said that, hollered it out?

We struggle with issues of fairness. We eye slices of pie to see if they are the same size. We compare household jobs with other family members, trying to divide the work evenly. We long for life to be balanced, harmonious, fair.

But most situations aren’t that clear. What’s fair and right isn’t always easy to determine. In the end, we find ourselves acknowledging that life isn’t fair. People aren’t consistently fair. No one seems to manage it all the time. We long so much for fairness, and it just isn’t there.

Then, we read today’s parable from Matthew and discover that, not only is LIFE not fair, and PEOPLE aren’t fair, but—can we imagine it--- GOD isn’t fair.

This story of the workers in the vineyard bothers a lot of us. Here Jesus is saying, “You want to know what God is like, and what his kingdom is like? Well, it is something like THIS:” and he tells the story.

Some things we may not realize--- like the fact that the grapes had to be picked quickly, before the rains began, and so forth—but the parable still troubles us.

God isn’t fair. But, believe it or not, this is GOOD NEWS. It may be hard for us to accept, but it IS good news.

God isn't fair.
God is compassionate.

In the story about Tom we may be able to see the father's compassion- maybe more clearly than in the parable from Matthew. Tom had a point: his daughter couldn't do the same work his older son could do. It would be harsh to demand it from her. But what about the owner in the parable? Why would he pay the late-in-the-day workers so much, when they haven't earned it?

I believe the answer is compassion.

We tend to see the workers as lazy or idle—hanging around not caring about much of anything, looking for an easy and quick buck. But there is nothing in the parable to suggest this. Day laborers in Biblical times were in a precarious position. Servants, even slaves, were sure their basic needs for food, clothing and shelter would be met. But day laborers had to feed, clothe, and care for themselves and their families on subsistence pay. The denarius was needed for survival. There wouldn't be much left over for the next day. The hours the workers spent waiting were tense and anxious. The workers hired early HAD toiled hard in the hot sun all day, but they were secure in the knowledge they'd have the pay they needed for themselves and their families. The workers hired late sweated all day in worry over going home empty handed to hungry children. The owner of the vineyard had enough money to give each worker a fair day's wage. He had compassion to see and respond to the all the workers' needs.

God isn't fair.
God is responsive and rich in blessings.

God doesn't measure or weigh the slices of pie we pass out or the hours we work. God responds to our willingness to give, to serve, to work, with blessings. It doesn't matter so much WHAT we do for others, or HOW MUCH we do or give, or HOW LONG we work and serve. It is the WILLINGNESS to give and offer of ourselves that God celebrates and rewards. God showers us with blessings in response to our SPIRIT of WILLINGNESS to work and give in his honor.

God isn't fair.
God is generous.

God gives more than was merited or earned. This is really important, because frankly, we very often don't merit or earn much. We are stubborn, cantankerous, self-focused, quick to anger and take offense, often grumbling, often anxious, blindly going our own way, instead of following God's call to travel along HIS

way. Actually, all those workers who started early in the day were all of these things. And they received all that they needed, even so. God didn't say, "Hey, because you are being so nasty and jealous, I'm not going to pay you anything at all!!" God is generous offering us all that we need and more.

God isn't fair.

God doesn't have a need for fairness.

Was it fair that God should love us so much that he would come to us in the flesh—that he would live and work and walk among us, offering love and healing and hope, only to be despised, rejected, feared and nailed to a cross??

Perhaps you've heard this saying:

I asked God how much he loved me, and he said, "This much" and he stretched out his arms and died.

God isn't fair.

God is more than fair. God is compassionate, rich in blessings and generous.

And God calls us to follow his way. The parable ends with the words, "So the last will be first and the first last." What does that mean? I think one meaning is that we are called to forget an all-consuming concern with fairness.

When we are obsessed with obtaining fairness we experience frustration and unhappiness. But when we, in compassion and generosity forget about seeking our own fair rewards, we actually receive them—and they fill us with joy.

God isn't fair.

Glory be to God on high.

AMEN.