

"No Fair!"

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¹"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And 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?' ⁷They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸When 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.' ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, '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.' ¹³But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'" (Matthew 20:1-16)

If you are a parent, you have certainly heard it. And at some point, we have all said it. Maybe it was because your friend got a big corner piece of cake, and you got a skinny one with barely any icing. Maybe your sibling got to stay up past their bedtime while you were sent to bed early. Maybe someone else got the promotion that you felt you deserved. Whatever the perceived slight or injustice might be... whether we say it out loud or not, the old, old voice in our head pops up to say, **"No fair!"**

Earlier this month, as a neighborly gesture for kids returning to school at Chatsworth Elementary, Gerry, Maria, Anna Grace, and I set up a table on the corner of Wendt and Forest Park and hung out a sign "Free Snow Cones." A line quickly formed and we went to work. We had done this before in the Spring during the "Sprint to Flint," and we learned some lessons. This time around, we had a great system. I scooped ice into the cones, and Anna Grace worked the syrup pumps. In short order, we made a lot of kids happy.

Except for one. This child heard from a friend that someone was giving out free snow cones, so she and her caregiver rushed over. I scooped out a healthy mound of ice and handed the cup to Anna Grace, who skillfully flavored it with a few precise pumps. But when she presented the finished cone we did not see a smile. Instead, her lips started to quiver and her eyes got misty. She turned to her sitter and said, "But Jenny got two."

[To quote the old TV show, "The story you are about to hear is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent."]

I will admit, it had been pretty phrenetic at the snow cone table. We did not know Jenny, nor did we have any idea how many snow cones she got. But the little girl in front of us seemed quite confident that her friend had received a double share of sweet treats. The



sitter said, "It's OK, just say thank you." But the injustice could not be denied or ignored. As hot tears began to stream down her face, you know what she said: **"No fair!"**

It was the same reaction that the early risers in this parable had when the daily wages were paid. The ones who had spent a full day working in the baking hot vineyard could not believe their eyes when the workers who labored just a single hour received the exact same wage as those who had worked through the scorching heat of the full day. They had worked more, and they expected more. At least a snow cone... something extra. So they told the landowner exactly what they thought of his labor practices: **"No fair!"**

Now, to be fair, fairness, as a concept, can be fairly complex. Most of us think we grasp it -- that is, until we have to define it, or even harder still, apply it in real life. A fair trial, we might say, is one that follows certain rules. But don't we have to admit that there are times when the application of a rule leads to a result that we may not consider fair?

A fair distribution, we might say, is one that allocates resources equally. But if some people already have plenty, while others have almost nothing, don't we have to admit that there are times when equality is not equitable?

A fair result, we might say, is one that is free of bias. But don't we have to admit that human beings are incapable of being truly objective -- that all of us have blind spots and prejudices that keep us from seeing a situation with clarity and impartiality?

Yes... but that does not mean that we shouldn't try, does it? I think we would all agree that the pursuit of fairness is still a worthy goal, even if we fall short much of the time. Taking turns and sharing with others are good ethical practices. Playing by the rules is a good ethical practice. Being honest and truthful in our dealings is a good ethical practice. Caring about how others are treated and how they feel, these are good ethical practices. And if we pursue these virtues earnestly, faithfully, and consistently, then the world has a much better chance of drawing close to something that is equitable, just, and fair.

Using this lens, we might question whether the right ethical guidelines were followed in the vineyard. Wouldn't the pursuit of equality and equity suggest that wages should be calculated by hours worked, not by a flat daily wage? Would it not seem like bias or prejudice to give substantially more to some workers?

Before we go too far down this path, we need to remember that this not just a story; it is a parable. And a parable, by definition, is designed to disrupt our normal ways of thinking. A parable purposely breaks our normal assumptions, hoping to redirect our reflexive ways of looking at the world. Jesus knew that our first reaction to this story was likely to be "No fair!" but he wants us to push beyond the initial, knee-jerk reaction and go deeper. And once we do that, we realize how little we know about this situation.

For example, we do not know anything about what happened the day before. What if those who got to the vineyard early this morning had been the ones who were late yesterday?

We also know nothing about the socio-economic realities of the region. What if the early arrivals were members of the local grape-picking guild -- insiders with papers and credentials who were always the first ones to be hired?

Maybe one of the workers who came late had been home taking care of a sick child or parent during the day... maybe they got there as early as they could?

And what about those people who were, as the story says, *"standing idle in the marketplace"*? There are people in our own community in that exact situation. They gather in the Home Depot parking lot, or in certain places in Mamaroneck, hoping that someone

might come by looking for day laborers. These people are not lazy. They want to work. They want to contribute. They just haven't been able to find anything stable. They lack connections and work history. What is fair for them?

Or how about the type of work that was being done in the vineyard? What if the morning work was much easier, but the labor at the end of the day was more demanding and exhausting? Perhaps the latecomers had to lug all the bags that had been filled earlier in the day. Shouldn't the more difficult work be paid at a higher rate? While we fret over the inequality of the hourly wage, could we be ignoring the fact that the various workers were hardly equal. Some may have been skilled pruners or pickers. Others may have been strong diggers or land clearers. Their skills and aptitudes varied. And their needs were not equal either. Single men, for example, would only have to look out for themselves, but workers with families would have had many mouths to feed.

Now I realize that I am filling in the blanks of this story with a lot of hypotheticals, but the point is that the story itself gives us none of these details. We are given two data points: when they started work and what they got paid. But the determination of what is fair, what is just, and what is equitable almost always turns on specifics and details like these. And the simple truth is that, in this story, we are not given any of these specifics or details.

So who gets to decide what is fair? The ones who know only a small part of the story? Or the One who sees the entire vineyard... the One who intimately knows every person laboring in it... what they have and what they lack... what they need and what they have to offer... what will keep them safe and secure... what will help them not just live, but thrive?

The answer is, of course, the latter, the landowner, the One responsible for the whole operation. It is clear that landowner in this story represents God, the Creator, Savior, and Sustainer of the world. And the story makes it clear that God is trying to run a different kind of vineyard. The wisdom of this vineyard is different than the wisdom of the world, and the economy of this vineyard is different than the economy of the world.¹ As Shelley Douglass of *Sojourner's* magazine has written: "God's economy is not like ours. We hoard and stockpile; we measure out the day's pay according to hours worked. God, however, simply sees that there is enough for everyone. Enough manna - but no more. A day's wages - no less."² At the heart of this economy there is a key promise. "Go out and work," the Lord says, and "*I will pay you whatever is right.*" It may not be what you would add up for yourself, but you can trust me in the end to deal fairly, equitably, and justly not only with you, but for everyone.

That is an amazing promise, and yet the laborers in the story cannot see it. Even though they got a fair day's wage, even though God gave them what was promised, they cannot get past their own limited vision. In the face of that stubbornness, the divine landowner remains remarkably patient and reasonable. "*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*" the landowner says. "Who are you to tell me what I should do with my care, with my grace, with my love? Who are you to question my generosity?"

Truth be told, when we were giving out those snow cones, we struggled with that concept a little. We set out to be generous, to offer gifts for free to our neighbors. We were

¹Rev. Thomas A. Sweet, "Finally Comes the Poet," www.firstpresjamestown.com/2007Sermons/finally_comes_the_poet.htm

² "Radical Gratitude," http://www.nwumf.org/images/radical_gratitude/year_a/radical_gratitude_sept1508.pdf

also trying to be fair and equitable about it. So in our minds we committed to a rule of “one snow cone per customer.”

But almost immediately kids started asking if they could take an extra snow cone to their brother, or mother, or friend. There was no way to know if that was really what they were doing, or if they were just angling for a second one. What was fair? On the fly, we determined that it did not seem right, it did not feel right, to doubt their veracity or suspect their motives. Better to trust. So, we abandoned the “one per customer” rule in favor of generosity, even if a little voice in my own head wondered if that was really fair.

Could we be sure that Jenny, who probably did get two snow cones, would enjoy the first and share the gift of the second? No. But it seemed like the right call – to trust the impulse toward generosity... or, to use the words of Jesus, to trust that little Jenny was getting whatever was right.

But you can see how her friend, when she saw Jenny walking away with two snow cones, could easily assume that Jenny was going to keep both for herself, could easily assume that what was happening was not fair. In her defense, she did not know – she could not know – the larger story. She could not see the whole picture. And that is true of us all. None of us can see the full picture of God’s generosity.

But we do have a choice to choose trust. We do have a choice to trust God’s generosity. We can admit and recognize that the way God gives is not the way we give. Our giving is often partial, grudging, uncertain, and transactional. But God’s giving is generous, complete, lavish, and loving. And even if we cannot fully relate to that kind of generosity, even if we cannot fully understand it, we have to say that it is good news for you, for me, for everyone in the vineyard... because someday, for reasons we cannot yet see or appreciate, we might be the ones who show up late, and need a little extra grace from the hand of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.