

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 22, 2020 (Proper 20, Year A)
Matthew 20:1-16

An old "Family Circus" comic strip shows the two boys Jeff and Billy squabbling over the size of the slices of pie their mom has placed before them. "They aren't the same," Jeff pouts. Mom tries again, evening-up the slices. Still Jeff is upset. "They still aren't the same!" he whines. This time Mom uses a ruler and absolutely proves that both slices of pie are the exact same size. "But Mom," Jeff complains, "I want mine to be just like Billy's . . . only bigger!"

When children complain, "That's not fair!" what do parents say? They say, "LIFE isn't fair." EVERY parent says that! Friends, life may be MANY things, but FAIR is not one of them.

Jesus' parable is ABOUT fairness. The ones who'd only been working an hour each received a FULL days' wage. This DELIGHTED those who had been working since six that morning. "WE must be getting MORE than we were promised," they thought. But when their time came to be paid, they each received ONLY a full day's wage. Matthew tells us there was grumbling in that vineyard. They said, "It's not fair. These last worked only one hour, and you have made them EQUAL to us."

Let's be honest. WE would be up in arms too. Most of us are confirmed capitalists. The people who worked all day ought to be paid MORE than the lazy miscreants who worked only an hour. They were RIGHT to grumble. It's not FAIR!

But then the landowner says something interesting. He says, "I agreed to pay the others what was right." It raises the question: "What IS right?" "What IS fair?" GOD'S ANSWERS are not always the SAME as ours -- and we may not always LIKE God's answers.

The workers' problem was that they COMPARED themselves to the others. (When you read the Bible, you find that USUALLY doesn't work out too well. As I always tell my kids, nothing GOOD comes from comparing yourself to somebody else.) They complained, "You have made them EQUAL to us." Fairness to THEM meant that there should be a hierarchy based on time worked. They make a distinction between "US" and "THEM," that "WE" are BETTER than "THEY" are. "WE" deserve MORE than "THEY" do.

But to Jesus' way of thinking, there are NO distinctions. We're not PAID according to what we do, how hard or how long we've worked; we're BLESSED to have a JOB, to receive our daily bread, based ONLY on God's love and mercy.

David Lose wrote:

No joy comes from comparisons. Have you ever noticed that? Rather than be content with what you have or who you ARE or what you've accomplished, we so regularly look to those AROUND us to decide whether it is ENOUGH based on what OTHERS have or are or have accomplished.

I suspect this is part of being human.... And so we enjoy the car we drive...until we see a neighbor with a nicer or newer one. We are content in our relationship, but wonder if the couple just down the street is happier. We love our kids, but wish they could be better-rounded or more accomplished, like our best friend's kids appear to be. We feel good about our grades, until we hear about the kid who is acing all his or her classes. Or, from the REVERSE direction -- we see where someone else has made a mistake and thank our lucky stars we're smarter than that. Or we look with a bit of derision at the unhappiness of a friend and sadly conclude it's really his OWN fault and are glad we make better choices.

The list could go on, but you probably get the point. No joy comes from comparisons. Only envy and resentment and bitterness or, occasionally, a shallow and superficial pride because you've chosen to make yourself feel better by looking down on someone else. And

not only do we not bring joy, but we unintentionally denigrate the actual present reality with which we have been blessed.... Do we, in short, choose comparisons or do we choose joy?

A Jewish story tells of the good fortune of a hardworking farmer. The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given DOUBLE to his neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received a hundred cattle, and he was overjoyed...until he saw that his neighbor had TWO hundred. So he wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy...until he saw that his neighbor had TWO hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God's goodness, the farmer couldn't escape feeling jealous and slighted, because his neighbor had received more than he had. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept.

On his TV show Louis, Louis C.K. tried to teach his daughter a lesson on fairness. His daughter said, "Why does she get one, and not me?"

Louis said, "You're NEVER gonna get the same things as other people. It's NEVER going to be equal. It's not gonna happen EVER in your life so, you might as well learn that now, okay?"

And when she complained again that it wasn't fair, he said something I wouldn't expect from a comedian. He said, "Listen. The only time you should look in your neighbor's bowl is to make sure THEY have enough. You don't look in your neighbor's bowl to see if YOU have... as MUCH as them.

Let's keep that in mind as we compare that half-blind farmer to another story. There's an old rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm, and when the father died, they had found their working together so MEANINGFUL that they decided to KEEP their partnership. So each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest, they would divide EQUALLY what they had produced.

Across the years the elder brother never married, stayed an old bachelor. The younger brother DID marry and had eight wonderful children. Some years later when they were having a wonderful harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs MORE of this harvest than I do, but I know he's much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night, when he's already asleep, I'll take some of what I have in my barn and I'll slip it over into HIS barn, to help him feed his children.

At the very same time he was thinking that, the YOUNGER brother was thinking to himself, "God has given me these wonderful children to take care of me. My brother hasn't been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old AGE than I do. But I know him. He's much too fair. He'll never renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I have in my barn and slip it over into HIS barn."

And so one night when the moon was full, as you may have already anticipated, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity.

The old rabbi said that THOUGH there wasn't a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God weeping, but this time for joy, because two of his children had gotten the point. Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy, and because we are made in God's IMAGE, BEING GENEROUS is the secret to OUR joy as well. Life is not fair, and THANK GOD! It's not fair because it's rooted in grace.

Grace that can be calculated and expected WOULD be FAIR, but then it's NOT GRACE anymore. Grace ISN'T fair; it's AMAZING. Grace is ALWAYS AMAZING grace. We don't deserve anything, but the grace of God saves us anyway.

And likewise, we, God's children, are not CALLED to be FAIR; we are called to be GENEROUS. "The only time you should look in your neighbor's bowl is to make sure THEY have enough. You don't look in your neighbor's bowl to see if YOU have... as MUCH as them."

Think about YOUR life for a moment. Consider all the people who have loved you. Consider everything you have received, how richly God has blessed you. Is that FAIR?

Why would you want ANY of God's children to receive ANY less than you have? The least among us is not one of "them," but one of "us." "The last shall be first and the first shall be last," Jesus said. This is God's will – that ALL should have ENOUGH, and may God's will be done. Amen.