

“A generous God”
Matthew 20:1-16
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We have a passage of scripture this morning that makes one thing crystal clear. I think when you hear this one thing you will find that it is welcome news. In the midst of a parable about workers in the vineyard, Jesus wants us to know one thing about God. God is fair!

Here is the setting. A landowner hires some workers for a full day’s worth of work. They agree on the wages. It is a fair wage, a denarius, which according to the footnotes in my bible is the usual daily wage for a laborer. The laborers go into the vineyard and work a full day. When the day comes to an end and the owner shows up to pay the laborers, he gives them exactly what is promised. He gives them the agreed upon amount, a denarius, a day’s worth of wage for a day’s worth of work. Since Jesus has told us the parable is about the kingdom of heaven, it is obvious God is the landowner. God pays a day’s worth of wages for a day’s worth of work. God is fair.

The disciples must have heard this parable and exhaled a huge sigh of relief. This is chapter 20 in the Gospel of Matthew. The disciples have been at this business of following Jesus for a good long time. When chapter 20 in the Gospel of Matthew ends, we come to chapter 21 and Jesus enters Jerusalem and by that point there are just a few days left until this whole story wraps up...sort of. But you know what I mean. In terms of following the earthly Jesus, we are almost at the very end. What a good time to let the disciples know God is fair.

In fact, this very parable was told in response to a question Peter asked Jesus. A rich young man had just made a difficult choice. The rich young man chose to hold onto his earthly wealth instead of letting go of that earthly wealth and following Jesus. The rich young man chose not to leave his earthly treasure. This prompted Peter to say to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you.” There is a question implied in Peter’s statement. “We have left everything for you.” Jesus, are we going to be treated fairly? We have given up a lot, a whole lot to follow you. The question that is implied in Peter’s statement, “We have left everything to follow you” is the question, “What’s in it for us?” Which is pretty much what Peter ends up asking. “We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?”

To which Jesus tells a parable about workers in a vineyard. Those who work a full day find that for a day's worth of work they get a day's worth of wage. Peter, God will be fair. You will get what you deserve. Sometimes the followers of Jesus need this important reminder. Being a follower of Jesus, being a disciple, is no easy task. Being a disciple requires dedication. Being a disciple requires commitment. Being a disciple requires sacrifice. Being a disciple requires perseverance. Being a disciple requires work. And Jesus says if you put in a full day's worth of work, God will be fair. A day's worth of wages for a day's worth of work.

But if you are a disciple of Jesus, if you are a follower of Jesus, or even if you are wondering whether you might become a disciple and a follower of Jesus, things get better, and they get better in a hurry. The parable Jesus tells about the workers in the vineyard declares to us that God is fair. We have already stated that message. And then the parable tells us more. The parable tells us God is not only fair, God is generous. The good news about God's generosity is told to us twice. Jesus tells the disciples God is generous, and then he tells a parable that makes the wonderful affirmation that God is generous.

Before Jesus tells the parable, he answers Peter. Peter had said, "We have left everything for you." Then Peter asked his question, "What will there be for us?" What Jesus tells Peter and the disciples in response to the question, "What will there be for us?" must have blown them away. Jesus said, "You who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel...And everyone who left houses...or family...or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much...and will inherit eternal life." (Matthew 19:27-30) A throne. A hundred times as much as anything you left behind. And...and...and...you will inherit eternal life. "What will there be for us?" Peter, James, John, Andrew and all the rest, you have no idea. God will be so generous, so generous, beyond your wildest dreams God will be generous.

Knowing that Jesus has just told his disciples about the amazing generosity of God, we can hardly wait to hear the parable he proceeds to tell, which is the parable found in Matthew 20, verses 1-16, the parable commonly referred to as the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. That is the parable where we learn God is fair. Some laborers get hired to work a full day with the promise they will be paid a full day's wage and that is exactly what happens. At the end of the day they receive a day's wage for a day's work. They find out God is fair. And guess what they do? Guess what they do when God treats them fairly? The workers who worked a full day and got paid for a full day complain! You heard me right. They complain! What? Why on earth would they complain? They were treated fairly, which is how we desperately yearn to be treated by God. If we put in a full day's work, we expect God to give us a

full day's wages. God does that in the parable. God treats the workers fairly. So why do they complain?

The workers complain because God is generous. Let me look more closely at what I just said to you. Let me make sure I read what is written down. As I say it, I feel like I must be making some kind of a mistake. But when I look at what I wrote, and I think about what I said, as strange as it sounds it is true. The workers complain because God is generous.

As preposterous as it sounds to complain because God is generous, in leading numerous bible studies and engaging in many conversations around the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, I find a large contingent of people who read this parable and discuss this parable who find the complaints of the workers legitimate. They find the complaint of the workers justified. They find the complaint that God is generous to be a complaint worthy of being expressed.

Maybe as we explore the parable this morning you will find yourself in the camp of those who think the complaint about God's generosity to be a valid complaint. You see, the parable includes not only those workers who put in a full day's work, there are other workers who do not put in a full day's work. As Jesus tells the parable some workers begin first thing in the morning, but then throughout the day other workers are sent out to the field. Some are even sent out into the field as late as five in the afternoon. Those workers barely pulled on their gloves and got out their shovels when the quitting bell rang. They hardly worked at all. They never even broke a sweat. Nevertheless, this landowner who is fair beyond question, also revealed himself as being generous because he gave the late arriving and little laboring workers the same amount as he gave those who worked the full day. Because the landowner is generous to the late arriving and little laboring workers, the workers who were treated fairly and received a day's worth of wage for a day's worth of work are upset. They are so upset they complain. We almost get the sense that these workers who were clearly treated fairly complain that they were actually treated unfairly, because they who were treated fairly have now found that others were treated generously.

It seems that in the context of the parable, the issue is not that God is fair. That is a good thing. And the issue is not that God is generous. If God being fair is a good thing, God being generous is a better thing. The issue is not that God is fair and the issue is not that God is generous. The issue, at least from the perspective of the workers who worked all day, is that God is fair with some and God is generous with

others. And when God is generous with others, those who were treated fairly feel that it is unfair.

Personally, I think it is absolutely amazingly good news that God is both fair and generous. I like having both. But if you are uncomfortable with God being both fair and generous, which would you choose? If you could only have one, would you choose a God who is fair? Or would you choose a God who is generous? Would you want a God who gives you exactly what you deserve? Maybe you would prefer a God who gives you more than you deserve. Thankfully, neither you nor I have to make that difficult decision. We do not have to choose whether our God will be fair, or our God will be generous. God has made that decision. That is what the parable tells us. God is both fair and generous. Whether we like it or not, whether we complain like the workers who worked all day long, it does not matter. God will be who God will be...I am who I am...and the God who is revealed to us through Jesus Christ is the God who is both fair and generous.

In all likelihood Jesus had disciples like Peter in mind when he told this parable. The parable is told as a further response to Peter, who said, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" What will there be for disciples like Peter? Peter heard the call early in the morning. Peter was there when Jesus came walking by the Sea of Galilee, throwing his net in the water with his brother Andrew by his side. Jesus said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for men." Peter heard Jesus call and Peter dropped everything to follow Jesus. From that point on Peter had been there with Jesus, working and laboring side by side as Jesus did his preaching, his teaching, his healing, his feeding, his living, and his loving. Peter showed up early in the day, followed Jesus, and had been putting in a full day's worth of work ever since. In light of that, when Peter asked, "What will there be for us?" Jesus told a parable that assures Peter he will be treated fairly. When things get settled out you will receive a full day's worth of wages for a full day's worth of work. God will be fair to you Peter.

If the parable was told for disciples like Peter, who had been at the work of being a disciple from the crack of dawn...if the parable was told so Peter would be assured God would treat him fairly, the parable serves a dual purpose. Peter, others will show up later in the day. They will join in the labor. They will join in the work. Some will join fairly early, tax collectors who leave their booth to follow. Some will join later, ones who are healed and made whole, ones who hear the sermons and say, "I want some of that." If that rich young ruler had made a different choice, if he had been willing to part with his wealth and follow Jesus, he would have found a place in the community. Remember, Jesus and the disciples are just about to enter Jerusalem

and the earthly life of Jesus is close to coming to an end. This is twilight and the night is just around the corner. But if that rich young ruler would have chosen Jesus over his pockets full of gold, he would have been welcomed. And according to the parable, he would have been welcomed generously. Peter, from the perspective of one who joined the work early, others will join and they will be fully welcomed and for all the world it will look to you like they are getting an unfair advantage. They are being treated generously. You have been treated fairly. They have been treated generously. What are you going to do? Complain? Complain? I called you to be a fisher for men. If a man or a woman, a boy or a child, responds to the good news of salvation, are you going to give them only a pittance, only some spare change, only some dry crusts of bread? Don't you want them to experience the fullness of my love and grace and mercy? Peter, will you complain if I am generous? Will you complain if others who come late get more than they deserve?

And while Peter is scratching his head trying to figure out what to do with a God who is fair and generous, we need to remind Peter what Jesus has already told him. Before Jesus told the parable about workers who are treated fairly and workers who are treated generously, Jesus had already told Peter that he, one who started early in the day, one who gave up everything to follow, Jesus had already told Peter he would be treated not only fairly, he would be treated with incredible generosity. Let us not forget when Peter asked, "What will there be for us?" that Jesus told him he would sit on a throne and that whatever he had left behind to follow Jesus he would receive back 100 times...and...and...and...and...he would receive eternal life. 100 times and eternal life. Did Peter deserve that? Was Jesus being fair? Jesus was being generous and gracious. 100 times and eternal life. Peter, you will be treated fairly. But don't ever forget, you will be treated generously. You will get what you deserve, and you will get so much more than you could ever deserve. Because of that, why would you ever complain when I treat someone else generously?

Something happens when this parable comes to an end that really serves to overshadow the questions about God's fairness and God's generosity. I wish I could tell you that what happens is disciples like Peter heard this parable and rejoiced that God is fair and generous. Maybe they did, but from everything Matthew tells us, the disciples remained clueless. The next thing that happens with the disciples is that the mother of James and John sneaks in and asks Jesus to give her boys a special place in the kingdom, the other disciples hear about this and get jealous, and Jesus has to sit them down and tell them once again that if you want to be great in the kingdom you have to learn to be a servant. No, the disciples are pretty slow on the uptake. And I have to admit, I see myself in those disciples. That question of "what's in it for me?" and what's in it for us plagues disciples of every age and every stage.

And yet something happens when this parable comes to an end that truly does overshadow any question about God's fairness or about God's generosity. Right after Jesus tells this parable about the laborers in the vineyard, Jesus turns the attention of the disciples away from questions of fairness of "What's in it for us?" Jesus turns their attention away from those questions and he turns their attention to Jerusalem. "We are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered to death. He will be mocked and flogged and crucified." (Matthew 20:17-19) Peter, as close to Jesus as any disciple, Peter, who followed first, Peter who confessed first that Jesus was the Messiah, Peter, representative of disciples in general asks Jesus, "What will there be for us." But Jesus, God's Beloved Son, the Christ, the Savior of the World, Jesus asks no such question about himself. Instead Jesus, our Lord, our Savior, has set his face toward Jerusalem, where he will give his life for others. He will give his life for the world. He will give his life for us.

Friends, that is ultimately what makes our life in Christ so amazing, so beautiful, so precious, and so profound.

- The miracles of Jesus are powerful, bringing healing, calming storms, feeding multitudes. The miracles of Jesus are powerful.
- The preaching of Jesus is powerful, proclaiming the kingdom of heaven and announcing the reign of God. The preaching of Jesus is powerful.
- The parables of Jesus are powerful. The parables of forgiveness and seeds and the sower and Prodigal Sons returning home and Samaritans who show us how to love our neighbor. The parables of Jesus are powerful.
- But there is nothing more powerful than the love of Jesus Christ. There is nothing more powerful than the day God's Beloved Son climbed up on that cross and took upon himself the weight of the world, the sin of the world, the evil of the world, the suffering of the world, the sadness of the world, all that is broken and battered in this world, he took it upon himself and said, "I will carry this. I will carry all this because I love you." There is nothing more powerful than the love of Jesus Christ.

On the cross Jesus shows us he is not only with us. On the cross Jesus shows us and shows all humanity he is for us. He gives his life so that we may have life. Peter, do you really want to know what there will be for us, for those who follow Jesus. There you have it. That is what is in it for us. We will have life with Jesus Christ, and it doesn't get any better than that.