

It's Not Fair!

Exodus 16:2-15

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 20:1-16

September 21, 2014 Pentecost 15A

Like a lot of you, I'm a Cardinal fan. I hardly ever get to a game, unless I score a free ticket, but I enjoy them on TV, radio, and the sports pages. It's been neat this year to watch them catch up with and pass the Brewers in the NL Central—now if they can just get through the playoffs and onto the World Series! Of course behind the game are all the economics of baseball—building the new stadium, signing or losing free agents, contract disputes, and all the rest, with a salary structure that makes us a bit green with envy. Envy? Fair wages? Hmm. That connects us with our gospel reading. What if we put that parable into baseball terms?

Let's play a little game of the imagination. Pretend that Julius Lottabucks, a famous Belleville billionaire, doesn't like the Poplar Street Bridge and decides to bring a major league team to the east side. So he forms the Belleville Brawlers. Imagine that Lottabucks made an agreement to pay each of their players ten million dollars a year—flat rate. Some of the bigger stars went for free agency, of course, but there were enough good, hungry young players to take their place. Ten million—not bad, huh? Now it's time for the September call up, and they bring players up from the minors to fill in the gaps. What happens when the star slugging first baseman or the number one pitcher finds out that these rookies are getting ten million for a single month? And what happens when they discover that the secretaries in the administrative office, the vendors selling hot dogs or pennants, the guys who clean the uniforms and the staff

who clean the bathrooms are making ten million each, as long as they are working for the Brawlers?

Trouble, right? Can you just see the Commissioner of baseball taking calls from the other team owners to close down Julius Lottabuck's Brawlers? Can you just see the players' union rep flying in on a private jet to muster the players into a strike? It isn't fair! All the players would say. It isn't fair! And Julius would say, "Are you begrudging me because I'm generous? If I want to give ten million to Bob the night watchman, why can't I? He needs to make a living, too. He works hard. And so does Rhonda the bookkeeper and Ted on the grounds crew and Millie the receptionist. They're all my family, and I love them each the same."

Crazy story, right? Unbelievable. Who has that much money? Who would give it away like that? When Jesus told the story of the workers in the vineyard, the vineyard owner was just offering a day's wage to each worker, rather than ten million bucks, but the point's the same—what happens when fairness and grace collide?

Can't you just see the sly and subtle grin on Jesus' face as he told the story of the workers in the vineyard, and watched his audience squirm, and look puzzled? Confused? Outraged? Don't tell me that Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, doesn't have a sense of humor. Of course, he did. He got it from his Father—his Heavenly Father.

Both of our scripture lessons, the parable of the vineyard owner who pays all the employees the same amount, and the account of the God who tries to teach a lesson to a complaining crowd in the Sinai wilderness, tell us about two things—human grumbling and divine grace.

The two stories come together with the word of grumbling, and end with words of grace. Let's go back to the Exodus, where the grumbling people were comparing unfavorably their current hunger with their past status as well-fed slaves. It's easy to idealize the "good old days," even when they weren't so good, when we're not happy with our present circumstances. We remember what we like—in this case, the Israelites in the desert with skimpy food supplies were remembering the seasoned, cooked meat that they enjoyed in Egypt and we forget what we don't like—living in servitude and bondage. They asked aloud, for the umpteenth time, "Why did you bring us out into the desert to die?" So God answered their grumbling with grace and gave them manna. Now this strange new kind of food didn't look like grace, and maybe didn't taste like much either. The word manna meant, "What is it?". But still, it was food. And, of course, some people, being insecure or greedy, started to gather up more than they could eat in a day. But Moses gave them new ground rules. The food would spoil quickly—no refrigerators in the desert—and they could only gather one day's worth of food at a time. God would give them a double batch so they wouldn't have to work on the Sabbath, but that was it. You couldn't earn it, you couldn't buy it, you couldn't sell it, you couldn't invest in commodities futures with it, you could just receive it, like you can receive God's grace.

Face it. We're not comfortable with the incredible, lavish, unmerited grace of God through Jesus. It just doesn't seem fair that the apostle who risked life and limb to spread the gospel of Christ gets the same reward as the penitent thief on the cross. It doesn't seem fair that the ungrateful runaway son gets treated like a prince

and the hard-working older son feels lost in the shuffle. But the problem is, God doesn't like one or the other of us the best. God loves equally. God loves us infinitely. And it just doesn't seem fair.

A colleague of mine liked to say that we want God's mercy for ourselves and God's justice for everyone else.

Isn't it the truth? Anybody who has raised children, who has tried to be fair, has heard the cry, "It isn't fair." Sometimes it isn't. But most of the time, it just means "I didn't get my way." And I believe that we've all felt put upon, or passed over, or lost in the shuffle, and it hurts. It hurts a lot when we get passed over because of our age, our gender, our race, or our physical condition or when we get passed over in favor of someone else because of favoritism. It's like the older brother felt when the prodigal younger brother came home and was welcomed like royalty. "It isn't fair. It isn't fair." And often, it isn't.

Sometimes we think that we're not being treated fairly by God. But if God, who knows our innermost hearts, treated us fairly, who could stand? None of us live up to the image of God that has been planted within us. We all sin, we all miss the mark, we all come up short. If God was fair, we would all be in trouble—big trouble.

Thom Schuman, a Methodist minister, wrote a poem about this parable.

we know how the world operates: you work hard,
you pay your dues,
you show up early and leave late,
you sacrifice your family, your values,
your self on the shrine of stress.

then,

you come along,
upsetting the applecart
we have stacked so carefully
with all our expectations,
all our assumptions,
all we have been taught

handing every single one of us
the very same gift;

and you walk away,
your hands stuffed
into your empty pockets,
softly humming 'Amazing Grace'
under your breath,

as you leave us
with our jaws
scraping the ground.

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God isn't fair—God is compassionate. God treats us with mercy, with loving kindness. God runs up the path to meet us and hug us when we still have the mud of the pigpen on our robes. God isn't fair, and we should rejoice because of it.

Fairness is important in human relationships. It's essential to the family and to society. But in the parable of the Vineyard, Jesus was pointing out that God gives

love and grace lavishly to all who will receive. What God offers is grace; is forgiveness; is compassion; is love—not just by the teaspoonful, but in infinite abundance. Our cups will run over; our hearts will fill; our souls will overflow. Amen.