
God Is Not Fair!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 20, Year A

Jesus said that a landowner went out to hire laborers for his vineyard. Surely it was a gorgeous vineyard, devoted to producing fine grapes and rich wines of the most excellent quality. Hey! Maybe it is the vineyard, which produces the grapes, which produces the wine, which we use during our Sunday Holy Eucharist! Those tastes of holy sweetness and grace!

Like any good business, this guy's vineyard needed workers. All vineyards need workers. The landowner agreed with all sorts of people, throughout the day, for the usual wage. And then, when 6:00 came, the end of the day, those who had worked twelve hours received the same wage as those who had worked one hour.

What's up with that!?

Jesus says the twelve hour workers grumbled. Of course they did! "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."

Any person who has raised multiple children knows the truth of this parable immediately. Any person who has managed a staff of workers knows the truth of this parable immediately. Every day in life, every day in life, we can find something that is not fair.

And, when we are in charge, no matter how hard we try to make things equal and fair, it doesn't come out right! The weekly allowance, which we once agreed to, is not right, because the child taking out the trash does not work as long as the one washing the dishes. This wage is not fair compared to that wage, for one job seems much easier. Besides, John is different from Mary; you should take into account those differences when it comes to compensation. The complainers will always have some legitimate point.

One wise old grandfather had a way of explaining this to his grandson: "You're right, grandson, life is not fair at all. And you know what? You'd better get down on your knees every day and give thanks that life is not fair. You are better off than most of the people in this world, because life is not fair."

So what is the point? If life is not fair, what do we strive for? Any attempt to explain this parable according to our own economic standards, fails fast. There is no explanation that justifies God according to our standards, that makes things seem fair. God will give what God chooses to give.

God does not promise that all will be fair, according to whatever structure of fairness that we have in mind. God does not promise that each person will receive more, or less, because of length of work or time spent, or even quality of work.

But God does keep promises. The simple promise is this: God promises a day's wages, one denarius. "Give us this day, our daily bread." God will care for us daily, without the guarantee of long-term security, without some predetermined pension plan, without a portfolio invested in the latest hit stock.

This sort of care hardly sounds like a long-term plan, does it? In fact, it might be rather frightening. But it works. God's kingdom is about taking one day at a time, and receiving the grace needed daily to manage that day: nothing more, nothing less. The Israelites in the wilderness received quail and manna, but only enough for one day at a time. God gives us grace, like manna from heaven, for one day at a time. "Give us this day our daily bread."

I remember today the great movie, *Babette's Feast*, set in a bleak area of Denmark. The religious community of that movie is sincere and pious, but also rigid and distinctly unjoyful. The rules and customs of the community have remained over the years, but the passion of their past is gone. Babette shows up in town! She is a chef. She begins to prepare a feast which genuinely scares the local folks. Then, they resent her! They decide that they will eat, out of customary politeness; but they also decide, intentionally, that they will not enjoy the food!

Out comes great wine, bread, and the special delicious dish: the "Quail in a Sarcophagus." Quails, of course, are said to be a source for manna, aren't they? –Manna in the wilderness, which the Israelites received only one day at a time. A sarcophagus is a "flesh-eater."

As they eat that flesh at Babette's feast, a great miracle occurs. They are converted. A conversion occurs: from rigidity and control and utter fairness, to the unfettered festivity of grace, the sweet feast of grace! One meal, so lovingly and carefully prepared, was enough for them.

Jesus speaks about himself in such food terms. One time, he said he was the true bread come down from heaven. "Unless you eat my flesh," he said, "you have no life in you." Another time, he said he was the true vine, the wine of life.

That great theologian from Denmark, Søren Kierkegaard, observed that there are two kinds of life: the life of ethics and the life of faith. Both can be beautiful. The life of ethics sets everything out with order and precision and fairness. Yet, it falls short. There is another life, the life of faith, which actually touches the very nature of God, touches God with passion and joy.

This life of faith is larger than what is fair. The life of faith is larger than what is fair, maybe because it is so simple, like Jesus appearing in the simple delivery of daily bread, the daily wage. Jesus is known in the sweet product of the vineyard, the result of laborers in the fields. It is grace, pure and divine grace, without measure or scale.

In the Bible, two attitudes emerge when that kind of grace is present. One is thankfulness, but the other is resentment. In the parable of the prodigal son, for instance, one is the attitude of the younger brother, and the other is the attitude of the older brother. The one-hour worker and the twelve-hour worker. Gratitude or resentment.

Or take the Book of Jonah, the only book of the Bible that ends with a question. The sign of Jonah, of course, is paradox. The whole book is a paradox: a prophet who does not want to prophecy, a fleeing in which a man finds himself, a descent into Sheol which becomes a rising from the dead, a God who changes his mind, Jonah who one day is happy about a bush and the next day resentful. And the question at the end of the short book is really a question addressed to us, the reader and the listener.

The LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:10–11).

That question is addressed to us, to all of us, who often cannot tell our right hand from our left. We can choose gratitude or resentment. Resentment comes from the complainers. There are those who always complain, who will always find something to resent. Often, we are those folks. We are those folks who have been in the vineyard the longest.

Why does God let us resenters stay in the vineyard? According to my standards of fairness, I would like to think that the Lord's vineyard does not contain resentment. I would say, let the resenters spread their complaints elsewhere!

But God does not act according to that standard. No, God is not fair. "Should I not be concerned?" God asks. God includes us, all of us. God includes those with gratitude, and those with resentment, both alike. The workers in the vineyard are both the resentful and the grateful. The people in church are both the ungrateful and the thankful. The people at the Lord's table are the bitter and the happy. But God wants all of us to receive grace, and to receive gratefulness. Jonah and the Ninevites both.

God is not fair. God uses the simplest wage, the smallest sip of wine, to deliver the most tremendous grace. God uses the most resentful and angry prophet. Grace is that way. It does not depend upon quantity, or size, or age. Grace is like forgiveness that way, the same forgiveness that keeps us giving, seven times, seventy-

seven times. Grace is unlimited.

God gives the same amount of grace to the thankful and the resentful! In God, that grace, the culture of gratitude, overcomes the culture of complaint. Such is the power of grace.

It does not matter whether we arrived early this morning, or whether we just walked in the door. Early or late, we are welcome at the Lord's table. Come and let God's grace be unfair to you!

This grace is manna in the wilderness, and you will get only one small piece of bread. You will get only one small sip of wine. You will get even less than a day's wages worth!

But you will get grace, and not resentment. You will get sweetness and not bitterness. God's grace is beyond quantity. An hour's worth is twelve hours' worth. A day's worth is a life's worth. Come, says Jesus, enjoy the fruit of the vine. Alleluia! Let us keep the feast!

AMEN.