



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Is God Fair?

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

September 21, 2008

*Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)*

Matthew 20:1-16

Every now and then my mind takes me back to the summer after my fourth grade year, the summer that I was finally old enough to attend church camp. Our presbytery camped at a place called “Camp Lowry,” which was somewhere between Dallas and Ft. Worth. It wasn’t out in the wilderness, but it was wild nonetheless.

Of all the memories I hold of that first week of summer church camp—and I have a lot of them—one memory pops into my mind more often than the rest. And today’s text always brings that memory to mind..

It happened at the dining hall. The tradition was to form a single file line from the entry door back. It was possible to stay in the shade that way. And then, one of the adults would lead us in that great camp song: “Here we stand like birds in the wilderness waiting for something to eat.”

Now I was always the well-behaved camper. I did what I was told and was always where I was supposed to be when I was supposed to be. It wasn’t that I was such a good kid, but my pastor and several adults from my church were there, and I knew my folks would get all the details on my behavior. So I was dutiful through and through, which meant that if dinner was to be served at 5:30, I was always in line by 5:15. If not the first one there, I was at least in the first five.

About the third night, the camp director stood before the group. We had just finished singing about the birds in the wilderness, and someone had just said the prayer of thanks, when the director announced: “We’re going to eat kingdom-style tonight.”

I didn’t know what that meant but it sounded pretty good to me. But he continued: “Jesus said that in the kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” That sounded a bit suspicious.

And with a sweep of his hand he motioned for us to turn around and the kids at the back were told to begin the march, and all of us followed them, and they made a swinging circle and we followed them—the last to arrive—we followed them into the dining hall first. Why half of those at the back hadn’t even been there for the song. And a full quarter had missed the prayer. And there we were, the first, the dutiful, the well-behaved, being forced to watch as these late-comers—these camp honor roll rejects—got not what they deserved, but what was by all rights ours.

“Tonight we’re going to eat kingdom style.” Thirty-six years this past summer I heard those words, and I didn’t like it one bit.

And lest you think that kids are the only ones who have trouble with the great reversals of the gospel, let me tell you that adults aren’t immune to such thoughts of unfairness. A friend of mine tells the story about his congregation’s celebration of Palm Sunday

one year. They started the service outside in one of the adjacent parking lots, and then marched into the sanctuary. As you can imagine, those in the parade were made up of the folks who were there every Sunday. They had entered the sanctuary week after week and taken their place in the sanctuary. But on this particular day, when the faithful marched into the sanctuary, they found that a huge number of folks who were only marginally faithful members of the church had already filled the sanctuary. Whenever he tells that story, my friend closes with this line: “So many of the faithful were angry that day that we haven’t found the courage to try that parade again.”

“It’s just not fair!”

Jesus’ parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard hits many of us the same way. The story is designed to create outrage in its hearers, and it doesn’t fail to produce. We watch in horror as the steward hands out the pay: one denarius to those hired last, and one denarius to those hired first. One group worked 12 hours, another 1, but they each received the same pay. The story’s barbs dig in deep and before we know it, we’ve joined our voices to the first hired: “It’s just not fair.”

That’s one of the peculiar things about this parable. Many of us—I suspect even most of us—hear this parable and immediately identify with the first hired. We see ourselves as those who have worked long and hard. We see ourselves as the dutiful servants.

That’s why, when the pay is given out, we start to expect more because those hired last were each getting a denarius—they were receiving exactly what we were expecting. And so we start calculating what our wages would be on such a scale, but before we can add it up, we’re given our pay. One denarius. It feels as if we’re clutching a burr the size of Texas as it digs into our hands and hearts. “It’s not fair that you would pay them the same as us.”

That’s when the householder reminds them that he has kept his part of the bargain. He has given them exactly what they had agreed to be paid. The vineyard is his; the money is his. And so he asks them: “Do you begrudge my generosity?”

You bet they do. As one commentator puts it, they are like most human beings. “...they have an innate sense of what is fair and what is not. Equal pay for equal work is fair; equal pay for unequal work is not fair. Rewarding those who do the most work is fair; rewarding those who do the least is not fair. Treating everyone the same is fair; treating everyone the same when they are *not* the same is not fair.”

Life is so often not fair, which is why it seems all that much more important that God should be. God should be the one authority whom you can count on to keep good records—to reward people according to their efforts, to keep track of how long you have worked and how hard you have worked, and to make certain people keep their proper place in line. God should be the one manager who makes sure the line is decent and ordered, walking up and down to make sure everyone stays where he or she belongs, so that the first remain first and the last wait their turns at the end of the line. Life may not be fair, but God should be.

But it is not so, according to today’s parable. According to today’s story, God is the householder who doles out the same pay for each timesheet, and who instructs his stew-

ard to pass out the pay beginning with those hired last who had worked the least. 12 hours, 1 hour, doesn't matter. They each received the same pay.

God is not fair. For reasons we may never know, God seems to love us all the same, and seems to enjoy reversing the systems we set up to explain why God should love some of us more than others of us.

I am always amazed at how early in life we learn that system of thinking. I still remember the day I was driving with my older daughter, Rachel, who was about 4 at the time of this story. We were waiting in the turn lane at the traffic light before turning onto Massanetta Springs Road, when Rachel noticed all of the litter that had been thrown into the tall grass in the median. Here's what she said: "Daddy, those people who put that trash there are bad people. I don't think Jesus loves them."

Where had she learned that dangerous—though deeply logical—stuff? I had to wrestle with how my own parenting may have contributed to the notion that our love for her is in any way conditioned by her behavior. I had to scan my mind for conversations in which I may have told her that she had to earn what she gets in life, which she had assumed also meant earning the love of God. At the age of four, she was already part and parcel of the logic of our world, and at a deeper level perhaps, so are we.

But God overturns all of that logic, and baptism is a great place to begin understanding that truth. In just a few minutes, we will gather around the font to baptize Abigail. I had a chance to talk with our children and their families about that last Sunday evening during our ABC's of Worship class. In order to help them understand, I reminded them that Abigail hadn't done anything much in life yet but eat, sleep, and cry. I then told them that in baptism, God was going to claim Abigail as his own, and that she would forever be known as "God's beloved child." The sacrament of baptism became a lens into understanding. It is solely the grace of God that saves us—that claims us and names us—and the sooner we learn that we don't have to earn it—in fact that we can't earn it—the better.

By starting at the end of our lines, with the last and the least, God lets us know that God's ways are not our ways, and that if we want to see things God's way we might question our own notions of what is fair, and why we get so upset when our lines do not work.

God is not fair, but just imagine how that news sounds from the back of the line. If God isn't fair, then there's the chance that we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will make it through the doors even though we are last in line—not because of who we are but because of who God is.

And that's where this parable turns. The graciousness of God is shown not so much in what the reward is—same pay no matter when you punch in. No, the graciousness of God is seen in the invitation to join the work in the vineyard in the first place. The invitation is the same: go into the vineyard. And the good news is that those who heard that invitation first have more time in the presence of the gracious God who calls them.

God is not fair; God is generous, and when we begrudge that generosity it is only because we have forgotten that grace is something that comes only as gift—it can never be bought, or sold, or calculated. That's what makes it so amazing.