

Just Reward

Matthew 20:1-16
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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!”

Fairness is one of the earliest things we care about. Even my 19 month-old instinctively wants her fair share of something good like ice cream and will start shrieking if she doesn’t get some. Parents and grandparents are probably in the worst place for needing to make sure everything is fair. How many of you have found the perfect gift for a child only to realize that this means you’ll have to buy another present for their brother or sister too because otherwise it won’t be fair?

It’s not just children who care about fairness; there is something innately human about wanting things to be fair. Generally it feels right if those who are good and work hard are rewarded and those who are lazy and slack off are punished or at least not rewarded. We like people to receive their “just reward”. We like to think that when we see someone with a “good life” – a nice house, car or whatever that looks like in your books— we like to think that they must have worked hard to be blessed. The reverse is also true. When we hear of someone on welfare, we like to think that it’s because they are lazy and deserve no better.

In our Gospel lesson we find a landowner who hires people to work in his vineyard. He hires some workers in the early morning and makes a contract with them that he’ll pay them the usual daily wage. The grapes were ripe and as all farmers know, there is a great urgency to harvest while the fruit is ripe. So, the landowner goes out throughout the day to hire more and more workers. As for the workers who come later, he makes no contract with them. He merely tells them he will pay what is right.

At the end of the day he pays the ones who arrived last first. When the first on the job saw the last ones receive the full daily wage, they probably smiled. I mean, if the guy is going to pay that much for an hour’s work, what’s he going to pay for a full day’s work? Apparently the same. They were furious. Well, wouldn’t you be? I mean really? I know I would be. If I had gotten up before the sun and made sure I was at the spot where landowners would be hiring bright and early; if I had busted my butt all day harvesting bushels and bushels of grapes; if my back was aching from being bent over all day; if my neck was red from the heat of the sun; if I was hot and tired and thirsty and hungry, I would be mad as heck if someone who had worked only an hour received the same wage. Wouldn’t you be too? Our whole society and social fabric would go to hell in a hand basket if what happened in the parable became popular. Why wake up early, why work hard or at all? This seems like a very good reason for the workers to form a union and go on strike. I don’t actually think Jesus was trying to dismantle the economy. Rather, Jesus was—as he sometimes liked to do—stirring up and disturbing the manure so that everyone around would hear the message loud and clear. What was the message he wanted everyone to hear? Grace. There is tremendous love and grace in the Kingdom of God.

For a moment let’s look at the story through the lens of our heart instead of the lens of our head. Who are these people that the landowner hires later? Are they lazy people who didn’t get up early enough or could they be people who weren’t as physically fit and able? It’s quite possible that they were the ones who had been picked over. Do you remember as a kid being picked for sports teams? They usually pick two ‘captains’ and then the captains take turns picking their teams, one kid at a time from the group. Naturally the captain and the growing team are eager to get as many strong players as possible. It’s almost always the weakest, slowest, most un-coordinated ones who are picked last. Maybe that’s who was left at the market place at the end of the day?

I heard this interpretation of the parable when I was doing a workshop with the L’Arche community a few years back.



L'Arche was founded by Jean Vanier and is an organization where mentally disabled people live together in Christian community with those who assist them. It's an amazing ministry, bringing joy and life to so many who would never be picked first for a sports team. At L'Arche, "everyone is believed to have the capacity to grow and to mature into adulthood, and to make a contribution to society, regardless of the physical or intellectual limitations with which they may be living."¹ Learning about L'Arche allowed me to see this scripture passage with different eyes. Perhaps those who were hired last were there in the first place, but were hardly ever picked. Maybe some of them couldn't physically put in a full day's work. As much as we like life to be "fair" the truth is life is not fair. Perhaps that's why we crave fairness so much. I often wonder why I am so blessed. What did I do to deserve being born to Canadian, middle-class, educated and, most importantly, loving parents? Absolutely nothing. While in Thailand or India, another girl is born into extreme poverty and is sold by an uncaring relative into the sex slave market where she is abused until she dies? Did you know there are more slaves in the world today than there ever have been in the history of the world and that *huge* numbers of them are children? From the get go, life is not fair. I have visited with very elderly people who have wondered why it is their son or grandson had to die, while they go on living with no real quality of life. Why is life so unfair? Why do some people suffer so much and others hardly suffer at all? I don't know. I don't know. It's certainly on my top 10 list of issues that I will take up with the Big Guy when I get there.

I don't know why life is so unfair, but I do know that God cares deeply about those who suffer. God's heart for those who suffer injustice is great. God has a bias for those who are shoved aside or abandoned at the margins of society. In the end this parable shows us that God's love isn't divided equally among people. God loves us all, but he sometimes he loves some of us more. You can all probably think of a time when you gave your child or friend or someone you know more love because in that moment they needed more love.

In Mark's gospel, when the women go to Jesus' tomb, an angel appears and tells them that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Then the angel says. "But go, tell his disciples *and Peter* that he is going ahead of you to Galilee". It's a funny addition. Wasn't Peter one of the disciples? Why did the angel say "and Peter"? Here's the thing, Peter only days before had denied knowing Jesus, and before Peter even had a chance to talk to Jesus and apologize, Jesus was killed. I think that little addition "and Peter" was because Peter needed to be singled out. I don't think Jesus loved Peter more, but in that moment, Peter needed more love. He needed to especially know that Jesus came back to life *for him*.

There is the story of a woman who sat for a portrait painting of herself. When the artist finally completed his work and showed it to her, the woman was very upset. She did not like what she saw. The artist defended the accuracy of his work by declaring to the woman that everyone he had showed the portrait to had said that it did her justice. The woman exclaimed: "I'm not looking for justice. I'm looking for mercy!"

As much as we like justice—which is usually *our* idea of justice—there are times in our lives when we all need mercy and more love — times when perhaps we deserve less but need more. And because God is not a God who loves in perfectly equitable fair portions, God will give you the more you need in those times. There are also people in our world who are routinely undervalued and who receive less all the time by societies. Neil Matheson is in Belarus now, with Canadian Aid for Chernobyl. Because of the nuclear disaster that took place 25 years ago there are many more than average who are born with disabilities. In Belarus, if you have a disability—if you are an invalid—you are literally considered *in-valid*. (invalid = in-valid) That's the way it is in so much of the world, and frankly often we're not much better in Canada.

At a fundraising dinner for a school that serves learning-disabled children, the father of one of the students told the story about a day when he and his son Shay walked past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, 'Do you think they'll let me play?' Shay's father knew that most of the boys would not want someone like Shay on their team, but the father also understood that if his son were allowed to play in spite of his handicaps, it would give him a much-needed sense of confidence and belonging.

Shay's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked (not expecting much) if Shay could play. The boy looked around for guidance and said, 'We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him in to bat in the ninth inning.' Shay struggled over to the team's bench and, with a broad smile, put on a team shirt. His Father watched with great pride and warmth in his heart. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shay's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the top of the ninth inning, Shay put on a glove and played in the right field. Even though no hits came his way, he was obviously ecstatic just to be in the game and on the field, grinning from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shay's team scored again. Now, with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base and Shay was scheduled to be next at bat.

At this point, they had a decision to make: do they let Shay bat and give away their chance to win the game? Surprisingly, Shay was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible. Shay didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less connect with the ball. However, as Shay stepped up to the plate, the pitcher, recognizing that the other team was putting winning aside for this moment in Shay's life, moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shay could at least make contact. The first pitch came and Shay swung clumsily and missed. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly towards Shay. As the pitch came in, Shay swung at the ball and hit a slow ground ball right back to the pitcher. The game would now be over. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could have easily thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shay would have been out and that would have been the end of the game. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball right over the first baseman's head, out of reach of all team mates. Everyone from the stands and both teams started yelling, 'Shay, run to first! Run to first!' He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled and made it to first base. Everyone yelled, 'Run to second, run to second!' Catching his breath, Shay awkwardly ran towards second, beaming and struggling to make it to the base. By the time Shay rounded towards second base, the right fielder had the ball ... the smallest guy on their team who now had his first chance to be the hero for his team. He could have thrown the ball to the second-baseman for the tag, but he understood the pitcher's intentions so he, too, intentionally threw the ball high and far over the third-baseman's head. As the runners ahead of him circled the bases toward home, Shay ran deliriously toward third base. All were screaming, 'Shay, Shay, Shay, all the way Shay!' As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams, and the spectators, were on their feet screaming, 'Shay, run home! Run home!' Shay ran to home, stepped on the plate, and was cheered as the hero who hit the grand slam and won the game for his team.

'That day', said the father softly, with tears now rolling down his face, 'the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of true love and humanity into this world'.

I can't help but imagine those in our story from Matthew who were first in line to be paid, who had worked for only an hour and yet still had a family to feed, still had debts to pay; I can't help but imagine that they wept when they received their payment. They wept to receive the payment, but even more to be seen for maybe the first time as someone with value. God loves all, but some need to feel that love even more. Maybe today you are in a place where you need a bit more of God's love. Maybe today you need to be reminded of how valuable and precious you are in God's sight. If so don't be afraid to show up and ask for that love. Don't be afraid to come to God in prayer. Whether you need more love today or not, we are all called to share God's love especially with those around us and those in our world who need it most. We are all called to go to the fields and bring in the harvest, because: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few." (Matt 9:27) God loves all. So must we.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Wikipedia