

God's Fairness Doctrine
Matthew 20:1-16
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 21, 2008

When I read this morning's parable, The Laborers in the Vineyard, especially that verse, "Call the Laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first," I remember that many times at church dinners I've been handed the awesome responsibility of deciding what tables should be served first.

Sometimes trying to be creative instead of dividing the room in half and saying, "Those on my left can go up first, those on my right shall be last," I say, "All those with blue eyes go first, or those under 57 (my age) go last; but no matter what formula I use, someone will always be either first or last. Life's not fair.

No one likes being picked last. I remember in gym class when teams were chosen for dodge ball, the same kids were always picked first and the same kids were always picked last.

If you proved yourself to be a champion dodge baller who took a sadistic delight in smashing the weaker kids on the other team, you were a guaranteed first pick. If on the other hand, in past games you could never catch or throw the ball, you were always the last man standing, at least when the teams were being chosen.

But since everybody gets fed at church suppers and everybody gets out alive, at least physically in dodge ball, being picked first or last at church suppers or dodge ball can't be compared to the terrible tension felt in the market place when it came time to be hired. If you were lucky enough to be picked first, your family could be fed that night, if not, they had to go hungry.

Case in point: this morning's parable. Men, desperate for work, show up at the usual place hoping to be hired. These guys didn't have the security of a full-time job and a weekly salary. When they woke up in the morning they knew being hired was a crap shoot. No guarantees, all they could do was show up and hope for the best.

So there they stood waiting, just as dawn was breaking, when suddenly the local landowner showed up, looking for workers to harvest his grapes. Nothing's said about the selection process, you can't tell if the landowner knew who were the best workers and who were the slackers, all you know is the landowner, like your average dodge ball team captain had absolute discretion.

After agreeing on the daily wage the fortunate few went off to a long, hard day in the blazing, hot sun, grateful they'd make just enough to feed their hungry families another day.

Several hours later, at 9 AM, the landowner went back to the market place and hired a second shift of workers. Since these guys wouldn't be putting in a twelve hour day, like the early birds, there's no contract made on their wages, only the promise the landowner would be fair. Desperate, these "Jonny come latelies," tell themselves they'll be grateful getting whatever they can get. So off they go.

The scene repeats itself again at noon and then at 3 PM with the landowner hiring workers at half and quarter time accordingly; again promising, "I will pay you whatever is fair."

At 5 PM, at least an hour before quitting time the landowner goes back once more and finds more men standing around. Told they're willing to work, for only one hour, the landowner hires them on the spot, even though the day's almost over.

At quitting time the landowner lines them up and unexpectedly orders, "About face," and then handed out the wages beginning with the last group hired. Word quickly spread down the line those who only worked an hour got a full day's pay! Counting their chickens before they hatched those at the end of the line started speculating how much more they would get than the others, only to discover they were getting the same amount. Naturally they grumbled and complained when they got equal pay for unequal work.

Somehow the landowner's explanation for his decision failed to satisfy. "Look I told you what I'd pay you and you got what I promised. Why are you offended by my generosity? After all, it's my money."

You'd agree a bargain is a bargain. The landowner kept his promise, but you are probably thinking his distribution of wealth was patently unfair. Why? Because, chances are you see yourself as one of the early birds who worked all day. I know I do. And like me this parable reminds you of the times you were handed the wrong end of the stick while someone less deserving got better than you.

Someone once said Jesus came to turn the world upside down so it could be turned right side up, which bears out Jesus' punch line for this parable, "the last shall be first and the first shall be last." How else can you explain Jesus' outreach to Gentiles and sinners, those who didn't, like the scribes and Pharisees, labor their lives away in God's vineyard. The religious establishment was understandably confused and angry when Jesus extended "Chosen People" status to outsiders.

Remember the older brother in the Prodigal Son parable? He speaks on behalf of all past and present scribes and Pharisees. He was angry when his father welcomed home his lost son. Remember what the older son said. "Here I've spent all these years working hard for you, you never even gave me a goat for a dinner for my friends and this selfish son of yours who took off and wasted all your money comes home and you throw a welcome home party." It's just unfair isn't it?

Unless you are the prodigal son or the workers in the vineyard who got equal pay for unequal work. My point is, maybe you shouldn't identify too much with the older, loyal brother or those guys who worked from sun up to sun down. Maybe Jesus needs to turn our upside down worldview to his right side up kingdom perspective. Only then can we see God's Fairness Doctrine covering not just the Chosen Few but everybody who accepts the gift of God's grace.

I can sympathize with the Pharisees and the older brother to a point, but then we have to grow up and recognize the danger of keeping score, banking on your good works, and discipleship, because God's love and our salvation isn't earned, it's given. Like the landowner, God will generously hand out his grace, not just to the hard working early birds, but to anyone he chooses to welcome into his family.

I don't sense any one here would begrudge anybody who comes to God late in the day. We celebrate deathbed conversions. But maybe there is something we should be doing more intentionally: seeking out and welcoming anyone who is last in line, giving them your place and doing something to help them get ahead. Be aware of the least of these, the poor, the hungry and naked, the sick and the sad, those in prison, those without

friends or helpers, and anybody who needs to hear the Gospel and experience the love of Jesus.

That's our job, reaching out and bringing Christ to people right here in our own neighborhood. Do these things and you will never grumble "Unfair" when you see the last becoming first because you put them first, before yourself, in gratitude for God's love for you.