

God's not fair!

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That's not fair!

How many of you have ever said that to somebody -- perhaps to your parents, or a teacher?

That's not Fair!"

Show of hands. Be honest. Think back.

I know I have. I remember saying it a lot when I was young, because things were far less fair back then. I often shouted it when I didn't get what I wanted, or what I thought I deserved, or when someone was getting something that I wasn't.

That's not fair!

I'm afraid I didn't say it so much in defense of other people, when I come to think about it.

In today's Scriptures God – who is disguised as the owner of a vineyard in Jesus' story-- is not fair. God is generous, merciful, compassionate to all. But God is not fair. At least in the way that people typically think of fairness – where everybody gets what they deserve or what they earned.

Now I've never been very good at math. But I can suddenly get amazing math ability if I think folks are getting more than me. It's the same way with those workers in the Vineyard. In one sense, everybody was getting paid the same amount, they were be treated equally. Until those early morning workers started doing some math.

It kind of went like this – take the whole amount they made in the day – typically one denarius. Fun fact a Roman denarius would feed a family for four to six days. So it's not a bad wage for a day. Divide that by the hours worked. That's how much I'm getting paid an hour. So if I've worked a full day, I should get the full day's wage. But if someone works a half day or even just an hour, they should get less.

Let's say that the payment was in coupons for ice cream Sundaes. If I worked all day and I noticed that the person who came last got one coupon, I'd expect to get a book of 10. I'd expect enough Sundaes to last me for weeks.

That's fair. That adds up just right. If I were working all day. I worked more right? I deserve more, right? And if not:

Say it with me: That's not fair!

However, Jesus does math differently, and invites us to do it his way. In his vineyard, which also is called the Kingdom of God, the question is not about how am I doing compared to others – how am I doing in God's eyes or in my neighbor's eyes or my eyes – how do I compare. The question is how is everybody doing? Are everyone's need being met? Does anyone have more than they need that can be shared with someone who doesn't have enough? Without judgement on whether they are late, or lazy or didn't work as hard as I did?

What if God's fairness and justice doesn't measure out love, or goodness, or ice cream sundaes based on what people do or even how good they are, but is based on what people need to live, or even to live well? Those who worked all day got everything that was promised to them – which looked pretty good at the start of the day. And those who came in the middle of the day, were told they would be paid what was right. And that sounded good at the time. And those at the end of the day, probably didn't know what they were going to get, but were glad to get something since if you didn't work you didn't eat back then. And turned out that they also got what they needed to live that week.

God's Kingdom is not a fantasy place, it's not a future Heaven, or something that only happens if everyone behaves perfectly. The Kingdom of God is something that we are called to build, to move into and to invite people join us in – those who came first were expected to be happy for those who got there last, and not be envious or jealous.

Now what would that sort of world look like?

This reminds me of a story that actually happened to me many years ago when I was attending a church called Corpus Christi. Now the priest at Corpus Christi was a very just, compassionate and honest man named Father Jim Callan, who taught me just about everything I know about the Kingdom of God.

And this church, Corpus Christi, which means body of Christ, was all about serving the poor and seeking justice for those who were being harmed, and making sure that everyone got what they needed, and that people shared what they had.

One Sunday, as we were going into church there was a man standing outside the door. He was begging for money, and looked pretty down on his luck. And most of us ignored him as we were going into church.

But when we got inside the readings were all about the abundant generosity of God—they may have even been these readings, though I'm not sure. And then Fr. Jim got up and preached about how generous God is with us and that we are called to be generous like God is generous.

And we were all shifting in our seats, thinking of that man outside who had been begging at the door.

But low and behold when church was over, he was still there. And folks opened their wallets and were very generous with him.

Later that morning we were having breakfast at the little restaurant that this church ran to give employment to people who had been in prison. We saw Fr. Jim there and went over to say hello and to compliment him on his fine sermon. I told him about the man who had been begging at the door and how Jim's sermon inspired us to be as generous to him as God was generous with us.

Fr. Jim looked at me and said: That sounds like Cleveland. You didn't give any money to Cleveland did you? We have been working with him to get him food and a job, and we've told him he is not to beg in front of the church. I hope you didn't give any money to that man!

I stared at the priest in disbelief. But Father Jim, I said, you were preaching all about the generosity of God.

And Jim said: I was telling you what Jesus would do. I wasn't telling you what I would do.

And this is the very point. We are called to do what Jesus taught us to do – which was to be generous with our love, our time, our talents, and our money in such a way that people have what they need, can live with dignity, perhaps to model how to share with others. My friends at Corpus Christi did that every day, and they were wise to make some rules around what would actually help people and what wouldn't.

But that bigger lesson guided everything they did. We are called to be generous and wise and loving with those we know and those we do not. We are asked to be happy when other people get what they need – whether it's bread that falls from heaven as in our first lesson today, or whether it's food from our food cupboard or whether it's access to housing, or good schools, or clean air, or just wages, or any of the things that make for a wholesome life. We know we live in a community where that is not the case.

But I believe that God gives us everything we need to make the world that God really wants – God gives us love, and grace, and wisdom and compassion, lots of resources, and one another. And Jesus came to show us that there is plenty for us to do to bring on the Kingdom of God no matter when we arrive to do the labor. All we need to do is roll up our sleeves and get to work.

And in God's kingdom, now is as good a time as any.

Amen.