

“Enough”

Exodus 16: 2-15, Matthew 20: 1-16

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 2011

Lynne M. Dolan

I remember when my children began to talk. It is an exciting moment in a parent’s life. When they start putting words together it is even more exciting, finally real communication begins. We all hope their favorite expression will be “I love you” however, what we tend to hear most are not so much phrases of endearment but protest. I wish I had a dollar for every time my children exclaimed, “That’s not fair!” The unfair treatment might be about something they could not do or the way in which they believed I was favoring one of them over the other. My response was likely something like, “well, life isn’t fair. So get used to it!” Not exactly pastoral or even very compassionate, I do admit.

The texts for this week draw our attention to a lack of fairness. The story from Exodus begins with the Israelites wondering why Moses would lead them into the wilderness only to die there from starvation. They are grumbling and muttering under their breath. I can imagine there was a lot of “This isn’t fair!” being tossed around as their bellies growled with hunger. This is what we do when we are discouraged. We mutter objections under our breath until someone hears us and invites us to share our thoughts with everyone else. Suddenly, we have nothing to say. This is not very mature, but nevertheless very familiar behavior. What we hear about Moses and his people doesn’t seem fair. How fair is it to be taken out of one kind of slavery only to be enslaved by hunger and fear.

Then there is the gospel story. One preacher calls this the most hated story in the Bible. While you may not think it is the *most* hated, it does elicit strong feelings. No other gospel story has one proclaiming “that isn’t fair,” more than the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The owner goes out to hire day laborers at whatever spot men hang out to find such work. He drives up in his pickup truck and says, “Come on and work for me.” He selects a handful of men during this initial run who are thrilled to know that at the end of a hard day’s work they will be able to provide for their family. The owner repeats this process five more times throughout the day, loading up more workers each time and taking them to finish the work in the vineyard. The last group arrives about five minutes before quitting time. This is where it gets really crazy. When it came time to settle up with his workers, everyone was paid the same amount. The ones who came at the end received the same amount as the ones who were there all day. That’s not fair by any stretch of the imagination. The owner could have minimized the grumbling by paying those who had worked the longest first then dismissing them. He chose however, to pay them last so they could witness his outrageous generosity. In the end everyone got what they had agreed to, yet it seemed anything but fair.

As human beings we are born with an innate sense of fairness that is mostly egocentric. Our protest focus largely on how some decision affects us. I invite you to think of a way to complete the following sentence “it is not fair that...” It is not fair that you have to

have a college degree to be considered for that job. It is not fair that a colleague gets the promotion even though he has not been there as long as you. It is not fair that your kid's friends get whatever they want and you have to always say no. This sense of fairness becomes the foundation for our sense of justice and equality. Then our objections shift to the unfair treatment of our brothers or sisters. It is not fair that someone is not allowed to live in a certain neighborhood or sit where they want on the bus because they are black. It is not fair that same sex couples are not allowed to marry. It is not fair that women still do not earn the same salary as their male counterparts for the same work.

In the story, the landowner does what is just not necessarily what is fair. Imagine how the workers who came at the end of the day must have felt. They waited all day on the street corner, hoping the landowner would return and select them, only to be passed over time and again. They had arrived early in the morning eager to work like all the others. Much to their surprise they are given the same wage at the end of the day. They are eternally grateful for the landowner's generosity. No grumbling there.

So what are we to make of the owner's unbelievable generosity? Okay, life is not fair. I imagine we all have stories about misfortune coming to someone who didn't deserve it. You do all the right things, treat people with amazing generosity and still bad things happen. Meanwhile, there is the person that is disrespectful, never follows the rules, and doesn't treat people very well and skates through life unscathed. We tell ourselves, "Life isn't fair. Get over it" and move on.

So often we focus on what we don't have instead of the abundance of what we do have. We hear this in the story of the Israelites grumbling about starving in the wilderness. When one's belly starts to rumble and life does not turn out as we expect, we start cursing God (or the one that is right in front of us as God's emissary.) We do not trust in God's plan or the fact that God plays by a different set of rules. That is what Jesus wants us to understand when he shares this confounding story of justice. There is nothing fair about the disparity between those who have incredible wealth and those who are literally starving to death. It is not fair that some have sufficient health care and others file bankruptcy when they face a catastrophic injury or illness. It is not fair that we can choose between purchasing a 2,000 or 3,000 square foot home when last night someone in Hartford was turned away at a homeless shelter. This story helps us to focus on our blessings and to find ways to work toward leveling the playing field.

David Lose suggests "this parable lays before each and all of us a choice as clear as can be. When we look at our lives, do we count our blessings or our misfortunes? Do we pay attention to the areas of plenty in our lives or what we perceive we lack? Do we live by gratitude or envy? Do we look to others in solidarity and compassion or see them only as competition? The killer thing about this choice is that it really is a *choice* as unavoidable as it is simple -- you just can't be grateful and envious at the same time. So which is it going to be?"

This story exposes the hardness of heart that is part and parcel of the human condition. David Lose goes on to say that, "Jesus' inclusive, boundary-breaking generosity revealed

the envy and competitiveness of those in power. His vision of another way of being in the world -- he called it the kingdom of God -- betrayed the lie told by the protectors of the status quo that theirs was the only way. Shamed by such a vision, and unable to embrace it, they put the visionary to death.”

Friends, we have a choice. We can live in the light of God’s extravagant generosity, or we can begrudge God’s indiscriminate mercy. This choice has lasting effects on our spiritual well being. I invite you this morning to take two cards from the pile you will find at the end of your pews. Take a moment to write on one of those cards a grudge or resentment you have or something you lack or something of which you are envious. I invite you to be honest, because honesty matters. On the other card I invite you to write a blessing, some area of abundance, something for which you are grateful for in your own life or in the life of another person. Now hold each of these cards face down in the palm of your hand. Notice that physically the cards weigh the same. Emotionally and spiritually, however, one of these is weighing you down while the other is as light as a feather.

Now I invite you to consider which of these two cards you wish to keep. You have to give one away. I invite the ushers to come forward to collect the card you wish to discard. Then in these same plates, we will also receive our offerings, the tangible witness to God’s amazing generosity and grace. Take the other card home as a reminder. (This idea was taken from sermon notes entitled, “That’s Not Fair!”

WorkingPreacher.org, September 18, 2011) When we hold tight to those things which are not life-giving we are not free. When we focus on our blessings, on our abundance, all things are possible. Life is not always fair, thank God. But life can be good, when we receive each day as a gift from our outrageously generous God and strive to live by kingdom rules. May it be so. Amen

Source:

David Lose, “That’s Not Fair!” Working Preacher.org, September 18, 2011