

“Life’s Not Fair.....thank God.”
Reflections on Matthew 20:1-16
14th of March 2010

Life’s not fair, and Jesus doesn’t make it any better.

Take this parable for example. It bothers people like me who have an overinflated sense of fairness. Oh, and if these parables do not “bother” you in some sense at all then you are not listening very well. All of Jesus’ parables should “bother” us in some sense because this is what he does; he tells a story but changes – or adds – or subtracts – something that causes the story to cut across the grain of our carefully honed realities. When Jesus tells a parable there should be something in there that sounds like fingernails scrapping down a chalkboard (oh my goodness, to think there are kids today who have no idea what I am saying); it should be something unsettling, something that makes us go, “What did he just say?”

So let’s see if we can hear it. There is this guy, let’s call him “Mark.” “Mark” owns a factory, and in this factory Mark produces “widgets.” “Widgets” are wonderful little things that do everything; I cant believe you don’t have one...they’re only \$19.95. Anyway, suppose I am out one morning jogging around 7 AM and I stumble across Mark unlocking his “Widget Factory.” Mark says to me, “I’ll pay ya a hundred bucks if you make widgets for me today.” Hundred bucks for making widgets! Why not? I start immediately making widgets, and let me tell you something, making widgets is back-breaking labor; they may seem like nothing but it takes a whole lot of gumption and sweat to make a widget.

About ten o’clock Greg comes by; it’s not a good day to fly so he’s looking for work. Mark explains to Greg about the joys of widget making and Greg says, “Hire me!” So now Greg and I are toiling away in the widget factory making widgets. Around two o’clock Tom comes strolling in; Tom has run up some gambling debts betting on the squirrels again at the Bella Vista squirrel track, and is in need of some quick cash. “Make widgets with us,” we tell Tom, and Tom goes in and has a talk with Mark and is soon on the factory floor making widgets. It gets to be four o’clock – pert near closing time and time to wind down widget making. Marilou shows up begging for a job; the sick kid business has been slow so she wants to take a turn making some widgets.

The five o’clock whistle blows, and we run to the office of the head widget maker to get paid. Just as promised Mark gives me a nice, crisp one hundred dollar bill. As I kiss it and hold it to the light (never trust a widget maker) I notice Greg receives a nice, crisp one hundred dollar bill; then I see Tom get a nice crisp one hundred dollar bill, and then -- “Moses-smell-the-roses” -- Marilou steps up and Mark gives her a nice crisp one hundred dollar bill. Now I know that I may, at times, be a few smidgeons shy of a widget, but this is unfair. I have been working since seven AM busting my butt making widgets. I have worked more hours than Tom and Greg combined – yea, I am subtracting that Dr. Pepper break they took at 3. Then Marilou walks in at four, barely learning her way around a widget, and she gets paid the same amount as I do?!

Life’s not fair, and Jesus doesn’t make it any better. Let’s do a little reality check. In life a lot of times the bad guy wins, the good die young. Not everyone is honest; Bernie Madoff’s wife is still living better than all of us and they stole the money! It’s not how much you know in life, but it is who you know in life. Sometimes, no matter

how hard you work at something it still falls apart be it a marriage or a career. That's not fair!

When I went to seminary I went deeply, deeply into debt. It took years of working hard and doubling down to pay it off, and I knew it would, but what irked me, and irritated my overdeveloped sense of fairness to no ends was a girl I met a seminary. She had a full ride scholarship to seminary and a stipend and a job working at the library. Jealousy aside at all this, what got me in my widget, was the fact that she proudly admitted she was a Witch – not a little “w” witch but a big “W” witch, a wiccan! She didn't believe in God, in Jesus Christ, or any of that other “Christian” stuff, which is fine and dandy, go-enjoy-your-Kool-Aid-and-all-that, but the irksome part was she was given a scholarship, a stipend, and a job at a Christian Seminary that exists to train ministers, not cripple them with debt, and to put the cherry-on-top-rub-the-salt-in-the-wounds she bragged that she got all of that because her parents “knew” people in the upper echelons of the United Methodist Church.

Well, I never....but I did storm off to go complain to my mentor there at seminary. Never complain to people who know your life history because they will always remind you of the “unpleasantness” that nearly got you kicked out of seminary before you actually got in; as I sat stunned by that reminder, my professor added, “Blake, half of our seminaries are named for people who were nothing but crooks and thieves; life isn't fair so get over it.” And then he explained how my over developed sense of fairness would lead me astray.

The Vineyard owner who hires the workers at different times of the day yet pays them all the same no matter how long or how little they work says to them all, “It's my vineyard. I can run it the way I see fit. I did not have to hire any of you!” And this is the real crux of the issue isn't it? We Americans get so wrapped up with or sense of entitlement that our idea of “fairness” is always leading us to demand more. Let's be honest, “fair” is a nebulous term, a loaded word, and for most of us “fair” means “I get what I think I deserve,” emphasis on the “I's” here, “and YOU get what I think YOU deserve!”

That way of looking at life is only going to lead us deeper into misery and want because it doesn't matter how we stack the deck it is always going to be unfair for someone. Who am I to decide what is fair or unfair? Who are you to decide what is fair or unfair? Jesus understood that life is unfair, and that we make ourselves miserable wanting it to be fair because reality has a way of slapping us in the face.

We deserve this, we deserve that...this type of thinking grows out of a sense of entitlement. Jesus teaches us to look at life from a different facet; look at life from a sense of gratitude. The Vineyard owner does not have to hire anyone, and what the owner does with her money is her business. If she decides to pay everyone the same wage how does that hurt anyone but herself. The workers should be grateful that they were hired...even the “idiot” making widgets since seven AM.

Yea, the bad guy wins often enough. The liars, cheaters, and stealers are always getting away with it. No matter how hard I work things still fall apart. Does not matter what you know, but who you know and the guy that just got promoted got promoted because of family connections. But if we let this drive us crazy we run the risk of it also blinding us to another important reality; a reality that can only be grasped if we drop the entitlement mentality and adopt more of a gratitude mentality. We have to stop thinking

of ourselves as the ones that have been working hard since seven in the morning, and instead see ourselves as the ones who have hardly been working for thirty minutes. We never think of ourselves as the ones that just got hired, but we always think of ourselves as the ones that have been working since seven.

I think of all the bad things I have done – all the stupid mistakes, all the sins I have committed. I think of all the wonderful things that have happened to me, and when it all soaks in I thank God life isn't fair, because I shudder to think what would happen if we all got exactly what we deserve. Think about that first before you go off half-cocked thinking you have been treated unfairly, or before you walk off sulking because you didn't get what you thought you deserved.