



“It’s Unfair!”

Matthew 20:1-16

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, September 25, 2011

Seminary Professor Tom Long was serving on a faculty committee at Emory University that was reviewing an incoming professor. As part of that process, Long had the opportunity to see the salary being offered to the new professor, and when he saw it, his teeth clinched. It was three times his own salary! The moment he glimpsed the pay, his theology called out to him: “Grace. Charity. Rejoice for the good fortune of this incoming professor!” But his stomach was screaming, “What the heck is this?”¹

His gut reaction was: “This is not fair. I’ve been working here for years and proven myself to be faithful, hard-working and trustworthy. This bonus baby has practically no track record. What gives?”

We discover a similar reaction in this morning’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew. This text is undoubtedly one of Jesus’ most UNpopular parables. The story contradicts our fundamental sense of fairness.

It is easy to conjure up a mental image of the scene. A landowner goes out early in the morning to hire day laborers for his vineyard. Even today, most towns have a well-known street corner where people looking for work gather. Usually out-of-work men show up at the corner and stand around hoping that someone will swing by in a pick-up truck and offer them a job.

In Jesus’ parable, the owner of a vineyard goes to the familiar corner in his village and finds several people hungry for work. He says that he will hire all of them and give each a full day’s wage. The workers are thrilled. They high-five each other. “All right, we got a job! And the landowner didn’t try to short change us. We’re going to get a full day’s wage. Let’s go!”

A few hours later, the vineyard owner heads back to the “Need-a-job” spot and discovers several more people hoping to be hired. He tells them to head over to his vineyard and at the end of the day he will pay them a fair wage.

His must be a sizable vineyard because he still does not have enough workers. He swings back by the familiar spot at noon and again at three, hiring every individual who is looking for work.

Then, late in the day, a mere hour before quitting time, the vineyard owner employs one last batch of workers. They head into the vineyard and do what they can to help with the harvest in the final 60 minutes. Once the day’s work is complete, the owner instructs his foreman to pay all of the workers, but to start with those who were hired last. The one hour workers shuffle up

to the pay table and are stunned when they receive their money. Despite only working one hour, they get a full day's pay. They cannot believe their good fortune.

Imagine the thoughts that began to run through the minds of those who worked a full 12 hours. "If the one-hour workers received a full day's wage, we might get two weeks worth of pay!" Like thoroughbreds eager to bolt from the starting gate, they cannot wait to jump up to the table.

However, when their turn comes, their dream is not realized. The foreman pays them the same as everyone else – one day's wage. What sounded terrific to them 12 hours earlier, now feels like a pittance. They protest, "What's going on here? We slaved all day under a scorching sun and you pay us the same as these last workers who only put in one hour?"

The owner steps forward and says, "I haven't been unfair. We agreed that you would work for the usual daily wage, right? Why do you care what I pay the others? It's my money."

But we do care, don't we? If others work fewer hours, but get the same pay it grates against our notion of fairness. Why should someone who puts in 1/12th of the effort receive the same amount? It's not right. So, rather than feeling good about receiving the amount they agreed to at the start of the day, the all-day workers now feel like victims of injustice.

I Googled "symbol of justice" and the first entry was "Lady Justice." Many courthouses across the land have a depiction of Lady Justice, if not a full statue of her, on their courthouse steps. She wears a blindfold and she holds in her hand the scales that are perfectly balanced on truth and fairness. She is our model of justice. Blind objectivity. No special favors for the well-heeled or the well-connected. Everyone is treated the same.

But were the workers who toiled all day treated unfairly? Isn't it true, that if the all-day workers had never learned what the one hour workers were paid, they would have gone home satisfied? They received a full day's wage for a full day's work. It was only when they knew that others were the recipients of extraordinary generosity that their mood soured.

We human beings are a competitive lot, aren't we? We want to know where we stand in relation to others. Our moods and emotions often swing – not on how we are actually doing – but on how I'm doing in relation to you.

Most of us have much, much more than the basic necessities of life. If you go on a mission trip to a third world country it's shocking to see how little some people have in comparison to what we possess. If you come home after being with people who have only one change of clothes and you open your closet and your drawers to see all of your stuff, you get a sense of your abundance.

But most of us do not compare ourselves to those who have so much less than we do. We envy those who have more. We come home with our new Toyota Camry and we love our car; until our neighbor drives up in her new Lexus. Even though we are wealthier than 95% of the people in the world, we envy those who have more than we do – a better car, a larger house, smarter children, a grander trip.

Envy causes us untold misery. Is it possible to shift our focus?

Going back to our parable, what if instead of zeroing in on the workers, we put our eyes on the owner of the vineyard? Although the all-day workers seem temporarily blinded, the vineyard owner was not acting unfairly. He was acting generously. He did not pay all of the workers simply what they earned, because he wanted them to have what they needed. Each one of those unemployed workers needed a full day's wage to put food on the table and to provide for their families. The owner was not thinking solely about the work they accomplished for him; he was thinking about what a difference he could make in their lives if he was generous.

There are people in every community lining up at soup kitchens looking for a meal and at homeless shelters hoping for a bed. The response of some people is, "I earned mine. Go out and earn yours." Such people hang onto their wealth, but lose their souls. As a follower of Christ, I know that you would respond, not with a cold heart, but with compassion.

In the next week, you will receive an email or a letter announcing our stewardship campaign. You will be asked to make a financial pledge to Westminster for 2012. Please pray about it. And then pray about it again. Reflect on what God is urging you to do.

If you are new to the church, I hope you won't be persuaded by a myth that occasionally floats through this sanctified air – that Westminster is a wealthy church where a handful of large donors make the church budget. Not true. Our church family needs each of us to make a gift in order to support our vital ministries. And when you make a gift to Westminster, you can be confident that you are doing the right thing, because God is working through our ministries to change people's lives.

This past summer, 70 elementary-aged children attended our Vacation Bible School where they learned about Jesus and memorized songs that imbedded in their hearts God's love for them. Now that the school year has begun, Monday through Thursday, Urban Promise meets downstairs and runs an after school program for low income children, helping them not only with their academic work, but teaching them positive values and peaceful ways to resolve conflicts.

During the 10:Ten hour, there will be dozens of children in Sunshine Choir and DRUM, and 22 older youth in the confirmation class exploring the depths of faith. More than 100 adults will be in classes reflecting on their faith and how God wants us to live in today's world. Through our Christian education, God is changing people's lives.

Our world is experiencing severe economic troubles. In our country, 1 in 7 Americans qualifies for food stamps. In addition to the money we contribute to feeding ministries and the food we collect for local food banks, dozens of our members volunteer at Saturday morning breakfast, Sunday morning breakfast and the Emmanuel Dining Rooms.

This week some of our Stephen Ministers will be visiting their care receivers to help them with their grief, other members will be driving people to doctor's appointments and still others will be visiting people who are homebound and who will probably never be in this sanctuary again.

This coming Saturday many of us will be out on the front lawn beginning the construction of two houses in memory of Chad and Chris Miller making the dream of homeownership a reality for two families who otherwise could not afford a house. In a few weeks we will be housing homeless families that are struggling to get back on their feet. This coming winter when the weather turns bitter, we will feed homeless people who are waiting to get into shelters.

If you did not see our Mission Fair last Sunday, browse the tables in Community Hall after worship to see the many ministries we support locally and globally that help people who are hurting. You will see that through our multiple mission programs, God is changing people's lives.

It's impossible to measure the impact of our worship services. But I know that sometimes a passage of Scripture or a line in a prayer or a phrase in a sermon or a verse in a hymn inspires someone to forgive his spouse or understand her teenager or warn them of a dangerous path or encourage them to strive for something noble. Through our worship, God is changing lives.

I've touched on only a handful of the vital ministries Westminster supports. I hope that when you consider the amount of your financial pledge, you will think of many others that we have. It's important for you to remember the many ways that God works through the gifts we contribute.

Yet, a more important reason for you to give a portion of your money to the church is your own mental and spiritual health. Financial giving is one of the best measures of your faith. Jesus said it this way, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be." (Matthew 6:21)

Someone said that the only thing standing between an individual and God is his checkbook. May it not be said of you. Instead, may you be accused of imitating the vineyard owner in today's parable; someone who is determined to make a difference in people's lives through your generosity.

NOTES

1. Thomas G. Long, "Investment Strategies for Unrighteous Mammon: Preaching about Money from the Gospel of Luke" at the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, May 2009.