

FIRST LESSON: Jonah 3: 10-4:11  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 20: 1-16  
September 20, 2020

***“The Fairness Police”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Did you know that you can actually buy children’s T-shirts online that say “Fairness Police”? Whoever designed that is definitely someone who has had kids! If you have more than one kid you will know that when it comes to fairness, they will measure against each other down to the last cookie crumb eaten and minute spent with them. *He got more than me! Why does she get to stay up later? Even with an only child we hear, Everybody else is getting to go, why can’t I? It’s not fair!*

Our “unfairness” story this morning in the New Testament involves adults, but the principles are the same. They are unskilled farm laborers looking for work. The going rate at the time for such workers was a denarius a day. We could do all kinds of currency equivalencies, but that wouldn’t really get the point across. When I went to the job site Indeed I learned that the average wage for a farm worker in Pennsylvania is \$11.62 per hour. That would make the pay for an 8-hour day \$92.96. The only problem with this is that in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine the workday was 12 hours. Twelve hours at our rates would be \$139.44. It’s hard for me to imagine them being that generous in the 1<sup>st</sup> century setting. At the Pennsylvania minimum wage of \$8 an hour, the daily pay for 12 hours would be \$96. Still not much to live on. HOWEVER, probably closer to the 1<sup>st</sup> century, is the pay that same worker today in Mexico would receive, around \$16 a day, which is why these workers live in shanty towns in abject poverty. Any way we look at it, they were at the bottom of the economic barrel. And the law required that workers be paid at the end of each day, because they often needed that money just to eat that night.

The landowner went down before dawn to the marketplace to see who was available for hire. This same scenario plays out at Home Depots across the country today where laborers gather hoping to be hired for the day. The story told by Jesus is a bit unusual at the get-go, however, because normally the landowner wouldn’t do this himself. He would send his manager. The laborers were offered the standard daily wage—a denarius. They were hired and went to work. Then the story takes an odd turn. The landowner goes back to the marketplace at 9:00 am and sees that there are still men standing around. The first crew have been working since 6. He then hires the second crew. He tells them he will pay them what is right. He doesn’t give them a specific amount. They probably expected  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a full day’s work. Then he goes back at noon and hires more, and at three and hires still more! Finally, at 5 in the evening, (at that time known as the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, which is where we get the expression from)

he goes back and sees a few more men standing around. He asks why they are still there and when they said no one had hired them, he hired them, an hour before quitting time.

At the end of the workday crunch time arrived. The workers were all lined up. The owner told his foreman to pay the last first. Shockingly, these men who had only worked an hour were paid a full denarius. They probably thought it was a mistake. And then the ones who began work at 3 were paid a full denarius, and the ones who began at noon, and the ones who began at 9. Finally, those who had worked a full 12-hour shift were paid a denarius. Needless to say, they were NOT happy, especially in comparison with the 5:00 o'clock group. They complained, "These who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

But the landowner responded, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' And Jesus adds, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Now I have to be honest here. If I were one of the people who had worked all day, I would be really, really, steamed. I think most of us would be yelling, "It's not fair!" We should get a bonus. We did all the work. They just came in at the last minute and got the same as us!"

Who are these one-hour workers? They are those who repented on their deathbeds. They are those who wasted most of their lives and only turned to God at the end. And they are those reckoned unworthy by the majority. The early risers did everything right. They always followed God. They were raised with faith. They lived conscientiously and faithfully. But in the end they were saved right alongside those who had done nothing right, because salvation comes by grace. *It's not fair, is it?*

In our world we operate according to scarcity. There is one pie. We can cut it up into equal portions or unequal portions, but there is still only one pie. But the kingdom of God does not operate on these principles. There is no scarcity. There is no lack of eternal life, therefore there is no need for winners and losers. Giving to the less deserving takes nothing away from the more deserving. These are hard principles to grasp for people who have been taught their whole lives to be competitive. In the Kingdom of God the first shall be last. The landowner's question in the parable goes straight to the heart of the matter: "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Jonah, my favorite defective prophet, was not only jealous of God's grace to others, it made him furious! The reason Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place was that he didn't want the people to repent and be forgiven. The Ninevites were political enemies. Jonah hated them. So when he was forced to go and do what God told him to do, and they did repent, he had "attitude." "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who

relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Jonah was so ticked off that people had been forgiven that he wanted to die. Now that is a temper tantrum.

It is a tragic flaw that we humans have that we who have received so much grace, do not always extend it to others. We are the “fairness police,” jealous of the good fortune of others because we think they don’t deserve it. We are the prodigal older brother, not happy when the wayward one returns, but instead resentful of the welcome and attention he gets. At the root of our jealousy is fear—the fear that we will lack something. It goes back to that pie. If someone else has more, that means I will have less. And this emotional reaction based on our perception of the physical world quickly extends into the non-material world. If someone else is given honor and attention, we believe that means we will get less, as if there is only so much to go around and once it is used up it is used up. If another person is loved, we’re jealous, because maybe they will use up all the love and we won’t get any. It’s not rational, but it’s very powerful. We have only to consider the power of jealousy in the story of Cain and Abel. Cain’s murder of Abel did not make God love him more.

So how can we hand in our badge and retire from the Fairness Police? Step one is gratitude. I know, it always comes back to gratitude, doesn’t it? But when we are grateful for what we have we are free to rejoice with others and not resent their successes. When we know how much God loves us and has forgiven us, we know that there is always room for one more at God’s table.

Step two is to stop comparing our lives with others. There will always be some who appear better off, and many who are worse off. But the problem is we compare our insides with other people’s outsides. We don’t *really* know what is going on with them. Because people tend to project a successful persona to the world we can think another person has everything and is blissfully happy only to discover that is not the case. Our assumptions are often wrong. But life is also not a competition. Another person’s happiness does not rob me of happiness. God is more than able to love us all with a deep and boundless love. Joy is not finite in the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ story about the kingdom of God was just a story, but the characters feel very real. Being jealous and demanding “our fair share” is very human. Taking it one step further and demanding that someone else have LESS, is the ugly logical extension. But we do this in the world. It is why we have haves and have-nots. This is not kingdom living. And if we who still live in this world are to begin to live by kingdom principles and not worldly ones, understanding the depth, power and reality of grace is essential. We are ALL saved by grace. Not everyone has been afforded the same opportunities in life or walked the same path, but ALL have the same opportunity for grace and welcome into the kingdom of God. Amen.

Jonah 3: 10-4:11

**10** When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

**4** But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.<sup>2</sup> He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. **3** Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

**4** But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

**5** Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. **6** Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant<sup>[a]</sup> and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. **7** But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. **8** When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

**9** But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

**10** But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. **11** And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

#### Matthew 20: 1-16

**20** “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2** He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

**3** “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. **4** He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ **5** So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. **6** About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

**7** “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

**8** “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

**9** “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. **10** So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. **11** When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. **12** ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

<sup>13</sup> “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ <sup>14</sup> Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. <sup>15</sup> Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup> “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”