

“That’s Not Fair!”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 10, 2019

Old Testament Reading: Exodus 16:9-18

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. ¹⁶This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’” ¹⁷The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.

New Testament Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”



Sermon: “That’s Not Fair”

God is not always fair.

This morning we heard two stories from opposite ends of the Bible that make this point abundantly clear.

In the first, God gives out free food when there is none to be found. You probably remember this story. During the Exodus, God leads the descendants of Abraham out of Egypt and across the desert toward the promised land. It’s a long journey, and even though the people packed food and water for the trip, it wasn’t enough, and soon they start to run out.

Bellies rumble. Tempers flare. The adults get “hangry”. The children cry. Parents grow anxious worrying about how they will feed their families. Everyone starts to complain. And what does God do in reply? God literally makes food rain down from the sky.

What did they do to deserve this glorious bounty of sky food? Nothing. In fact, God’s does it even when the “whole congregation of the Israelites”¹ not just a few, but the *whole congregation* complained about having nothing to eat and talked about how great they had it back in Egypt where “they ... ate their fill of bread.”²

It would have been easy for God to grow frustrated with them. God could have pointed out all that God had done for them, including setting them free (with miracles!) from a tyrant. A less patient deity might have told them to go back to their precious Egypt, if they liked it so much, and “Don’t let the Red Sea hit you in the rear end on your way back!”

But God is gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love.

Instead of giving the people the anger that they deserved, God gave them the food they needed. When they wake up in the morning, there is manna covering the ground like dew. God tells the people to collect an omer of manna *per person* each day, which is actually quite a lot.

An omer was a unit of measure equal to about 3.4 liters³ which translates to a little over 15 cups.⁴ And according to *allrecipes.com*, it takes about three cups of flour to make one loaf of bread. Since an omer is a little over 15 cups, an omer of manna should make about five loaves of bread a day.

If you’re making *unleavened* bread, which takes about one cup per “loaf,” that works out to 15 loaves of unleavened bread *per person*. Combine that with a nice roast quail under glass in the evening, and that should be *more than enough* food to feed a person for a day.

God gives these complaining people not just what they need, but a gracious plenty.

But what happens if you don’t have anyone to help you? What happens if you’re not quick enough to catch quail or if your aching back just won’t let you bend over to collect manna?

The passage tells us that everyone collected what they could, some more than the requisite amount and some less. But when they measured it, everyone had enough. “Those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.”⁵

Whether you’re a robust, healthy family of strong backs or an older couple that just can’t get out to collect the manna like you used to, God makes sure that everyone gets what was promised them. God’s grace means that God’s gifts are given equally to every one of God’s people ... even to the loudest and most obnoxious of the complainers.

In our second story, we meet a wealthy farmer who needs workers to harvest his crops. So, he does what landowners have done for centuries when they need people to pick their crops: he went down to the city marketplace to hire seasonal workers.

Several years ago, I witnessed this first-hand when I spent some time in Immokalee, Florida. Immokalee is a very poor town in a very wealthy part of South Florida. Just 51 miles from the wealth and privilege of Naples, Immokalee ranks 873 out of 887 Florida cities, towns, and municipalities in average annual income.

Because of the many large farms nearby, it is home to a very large population of immigrants who work the fields. In Immokalee, like small agricultural communities all over the country, hundreds of migrant workers get up long before dawn to wait in the town square for tomato growers to arrive with busses to recruit workers and transport them out to the fields to pick tomatoes for the day.

Men and women gather, prepared for work with their gloves to protect their hands, their hats to shield them from the scorching South Florida sun, their lunches and bottles of water packed so that they can be consumed quickly in the fields without missing any work time.

But they turn out at the appointed place and time, long before the dawn of first light, *with no guarantee they will be chosen to work*. If a grower’s foreman chooses you, you get to work, and you get paid that day. If you are not chosen; if there are too many workers and not enough busses; if there is bad weather; then you go home empty handed.

There are no guaranteed contracts. There is no minimum wage. If you don’t get work in the fields on a given day, you might not be able to feed your family that night.

The landowner in our story would probably have had some employees who helped-out around the farm during the year, but at harvest time, the need for labor would have grown exponentially. It would have been normal for him to go out and hire extra help to bring in the crop quickly, before it rots in the field.

This point is an important one, because it means that when the landowner goes out to find workers, the people he finds in the marketplace are not lazy men with nothing to do. They are workers waiting to be hired. They know it’s harvest time and they are looking for work. They have

come to the square for that purpose. And there is a certain desperation. Getting hired or not is the difference between feeding your family and going hungry.

So, finding a good group of day-laborers, the land-owner offers them the typical daily wage and they agree and begin work immediately.

As the day goes on, the land owner decides to bring in more workers, so he goes back to the marketplace and hires more workers. Now again, the people he finds are not slackers that he has to coerce into his fields. They are likely the ones who were not chosen the first time around and who no one else has come to hire. Imagine their relief after thinking that they would not be able to work that day and then getting a second chance.

And later in the day the land-owner comes back and again and again until finally with only an hour or so of daylight remaining, the land-owner goes back to hire even more workers.

Now remember, it's only the first group that he hired early in the morning that have been promised a set wage. To the second group he says "I will pay you whatever is right." Beyond that there is no negotiation; no promise of any specific wage whatsoever. There is only the opportunity to work.

But at the end of the day, what the owner promised to the first group is also given to all the rest, even the last group that was hired near the end of the day. And so those who worked longest and hardest complain: "How do they get the same as us? They worked fewer hours and accomplished less?!? It's not fair."

To which the land-owner replies: "You got exactly what I promised you. And since it's my money, and I can do with it what I please, what business is it of yours if I choose to pay the others the same?"

It's easy to understand the perspective of the first workers hired that day. They've worked more hours, through the heat of the day, and they deserve more than those people who were hired late and might have only worked an hour or two, in the cooler afternoon hours. It's easy to commiserate with people who work hard and then watch as other people who don't appear to them to have worked as hard or put in the same hours, swoop in and get the same rewards. Doesn't seem fair, right?

But in this story, we are invited to take the perspective of the ones who are hired at the end of the day. We are asked to imagine what it feels like to be saved from a desperate predicament.

What does it feel like to experience the great joy and relief of being given a second chance to live, where none seemed possible before? While the landowner's generosity might seem unfair, for the workers who waited all day with gloves and hat in hand, waiting and watching the sun creep across the sky with ever-flagging hopes of getting hired on in someone's field that day; to *them* the owner's generous act was a life-giving gift of grace.

Scholar Kathryn Blanchard (Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Alma College in Alma, Michigan) suggests that Matthew may have been writing to an early Christian congregation who may have been struggling with the conflict between those who do the lion's share of the work and those who do little. As Blanchard writes, "Hard working 'good' people have always asked 'What kind of God would offer the same reward to those who have earned it and those who have not?'"⁶

It is a struggle reminiscent of the story of the prodigal son⁷ wherein the older, responsible son refuses to welcome back his younger brother who has gone off and wasted his father's money in immoral, self-indulgent behavior. The father's response is the same as that of the land-owner in our reading today. It is not a response based on our own human understandings of work and reward. It is a response born out of grace that gives extravagant gifts based not on the worth of the recipient, but on the love of the giver.

And maybe that's *not* fair. But consider this: Only one who believes they *deserve* the gift can think that someone else is undeserving. Only someone who hears this story and considers themselves to be among the first hired, could be angry that someone hired later in the day receives the same reward.

But who are we to assume we are the first hired? Who are we to assume that we deserve what we have been given? Isn't it just as likely, if not more so, that we are the last laborers hired? That *we* are the ones who are getting more than *we* deserve?

The last will be first, and the first will be last. God's grace and mercy and steadfast love confound our human understandings of what is fair. God's goodness goes beyond what we are even capable of imagining, giving us not what we think we have earned, whether for better or for worse, but what God knows that we need.

It's *not* fair. But thank God for that.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Exodus 16:2, NRSV

² Exodus 16:3, NRSV

³ "Omer (unit)." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 08 May 2014. Web. 22 Sept. 2014. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omer_\(unit\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omer_(unit))>.

⁴ "Online Conversion - Volume." *Online Conversion*. Robert Fogt, n.d. Web. 22 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.onlineconversion.com/volume.htm>>.

⁵ Exodus 16:16-18, NRSV

⁶ Blanchard, Kathryn. "Matthew 20:1-16, Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4, Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-reign of Christ)*. Ed. Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett. N.p.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. 92+. Print.

⁷ Luke 15:11-32, NRSV