

It's Just Not Fair!

Whitefish UMC

September 18, 2011

Jonah 3:10-4:1; Matthew 20: 1-16

- ✦ How many of you have brothers or sisters? Okay, if you don't have brothers and sisters, are you parents to brothers and sisters? Now how many of you have ever said, or heard, or thought, when it comes to these sibling relationships: "It's not fair!"? I know I have not only thought it, I have said it out loud, both as a child and as an adult. (A bit of my story) How I favor the eldest children I encounter....
- ✦ In contrast, a friend tells about growing up in a family of four children. "My mother was always very fair," she said. "She didn't play favorites. We always knew that we could count on her to be fair. But my father—well, that was another story. The truth is, I grew up secure in the knowledge that I was 'Daddy's favorite.' I was the oldest, after all, and the only girl until my sister came along when I was thirteen. I figured it wasn't hurting anybody; my father loved all his children, and probably they never even knew that I was his favorite. But I knew—and that was enough for me."
- ✦ "But then one day," she continued, "after I was grown up and married and a mother myself, I fell into conversation with my brothers and sisters, and I was surprised and a little bemused to learn that each of them had also grown up with the same unspoken conviction. Each of us had always felt sure that he or she was 'Daddy's favorite.' How my father accomplished that, I'll never know!"

- ✦ Sibling rivalry, of course, occurs in many families, especially when children are young. But as I have confessed, it also occurs into adulthood. Those of us who are old enough (another confession!) remember the famous line from the old Smothers' Brothers television show: "Mom always liked you best." It's as if we children don't feel there is enough love or attention or approval to go around, and so we must constantly compete for our fair share. Thus, the pitiful cry, "But that's not fair!"
- ✦ These feelings and this kind of behavior can carry over into our other relationships. [Use Bishop's Task Force example—"but we won't get as much and you'll get more!!!] If we have learned to see life as some sort of contest for power, wealth, approval, recognition, attention, and fame, we will always be on the alert for things that are not fair—that is, situations in which we feel we are not given our just desserts. We want to get the best grades, the best job, make the most money, have the nicest stuff. We strive to get ahead, and we complain to each other, when favors go to someone we think is less deserving than ourselves.
- ✦ It's easy to understand the feelings of the laborers in today's gospel story who had worked all day in the vineyard under the hot sun. They had, of course, agreed to work for the usual daily wage. But when they saw those Johnny-come-latelies receiving that amount, they were so sure that they would be rewarded more generously. They had worked 12 hours! Was it fair that they received the same amount of pay as those who had worked one hour? Obviously not!
- ✦ We intuitively understand the complaint. After all, we're used to multinational corporations laying off thousands of workers, while

handing out multi-million dollar bonuses and stock options to the CEO's. But this week, the statistics startled even the most jaded citizens: The poverty rate for children under age 18 increased to 22% in 2010, meaning more than 1 in 5 children in America are living in poverty.

- ✦ Amid a still struggling economy, more people in America fell below the poverty line last year, according to new census data released Tuesday.
- ✦ The nation's poverty rate rose to 15.1% in 2010, its highest level since 1993. In 2009, 14.3% of people in America were living in poverty.
- ✦ Some other examples: 1) the ratio of average CEO pay to the average pay of a U.S. blue collar worker: 531:1;
- ✦ 2) Percent increase in CEO pay between 1990 and 2000 (before adjusting for inflation) 571 %;
- ✦ Middle class families continue to lose ground at an alarming rate, while the gap between the wealthiest Americans and the rest of the nation's families grows ever larger.
- ✦ We're used to a young man not even out of college getting obscene amounts of money because he can dunk a round ball through a hoop, while a third grade elementary school teacher gets barely enough to make ends meet. We're used to living in a culture where some of the lowest paid people on the economic ladder are the ones to whom we entrust our preschool children and our ailing elders.
- ✦ But is it time to stop accepting these inequalities so easily?
- ✦ In everyday life we don't really assume that there is a direct relationship between the work we do and the pay we receive. We don't really assume that people who do the most work, or the most

important work, receive the highest pay, do we? What are the most important jobs in our society? School teachers? Lawyers? Garbage collectors? Truck drivers? Construction workers? Football players? Nurses? What jobs are most necessary? Who does the most work? Who receives the highest pay? In our working life, the relationship between the work we do and the pay we receive is by no means obvious.

- ✦ So this is not what the grumbling is really about. The real problem is that we equate individual value, personal worth, with the pay we receive. Not the work we do, but how much money we make determines who we are in the eyes of our society.
- ✦ But not in the eyes of Jesus. He understood the value of all people regardless of what their culture thought of them. He gave all people value. Even the last one to arrive at the table is given a full course meal.
- ✦ Our Jewish brothers and sisters will be getting a good dose of a reminder of God's lavish generosity this autumn. It's almost the time of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when each year the story of Jonah is read again in Jewish households and at the synagogue.
- ✦ God sent Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh what would happen if they didn't mend their ways. Jonah did not want to go, to put it mildly. He went to great lengths to avoid doing as God asked, and got swallowed up in the belly of the whale, among other things. Now let me put this in context for you. In Jonah's day, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, now known as Iraq—which was as hostile to Israel then as it is now—and sending Jonah there was like

sending a nobody from Tel Aviv to tell Moqtada a-Sadr, the feared Iraqi militia leader, he was going to hell.

- ✦ But finally Jonah couldn't resist God any longer. He did as God commanded and asked the Ninevites to repent. And now look what happened...Darned if those miserable tyrants didn't repent! Of course that was the whole point of the message God had asked Jonah deliver, but apparently Jonah was looking forward to seeing "those bad guys get theirs." He sounds downright accusing when he says, "I know that you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."
- ✦ Have you ever known anyone that you would like to see get the punishment he or she so richly deserved? Perhaps there are moments when we wish God wouldn't be quite so merciful! To others, that is.
- ✦ Last month, our country quietly celebrated a major milestone in the land of the Ninevites. It was the first month since the beginning of the Iraq war that our armed forces experienced no casualties at the hand of enemy forces.
- ✦ Is it possible that we as a nation could begin to move into a different way of looking at Iraq? Of seeing Iraq with the eyes of a generous God? Can we as a country actually give repentance a chance? I wonder...
- ✦ For we are such bookkeepers! And God is not! When the Ninevites repent, and the ne'er do wells at the end of the line get paid the same as the hard workers at the front of the line, and the people we judge most harshly receive the mercy of God, then it becomes painfully clear that there is something inherently unfair in the notion of grace.

- God does not keep track of things the way we do. God does not spend a lot of time deciding who is worthy and who is not, like we do.
- ✦ God does not give any of us what we deserve but what we need, and it is hard—very hard—to trust God’s judgment on that score.
 - ✦ No, life is not fair. Life is grace, when we live in God’s love. And I do truly believe that those of us who get offended by divine distribution of grace have simply forgotten who we are. We think we are the righteous prophets, sent to pronounce judgment on the skuzzy Assyrians. We think we are the diligent, sober, workers who deserve more pay than the shiftless drifters who show up an hour before quitting time. That’s how we see it, and we make the mistake of thinking that that’s how God sees it, too.
 - ✦ What we cannot know is that maybe, just maybe, from where God sits, we are all a mess. Some of us clean up better than others and some of us have figured out how to manage our fears by doing good works, but when you get right down to it, we are all Ninevites and ne’er do wells, only God wouldn’t put it like that, because those are human labels full of human judgments. From where God sits, I think we look more like hurt, sick, lost children, all of us in deep need of God’s mercy and special attention and favor.
 - ✦ Look again at the beginning line of today’s Gospel: “The kingdom of heaven is like...”
 - ✦ What if God’s kingdom is a place where there is no contest? What if “fair” isn’t even a word that can be used in God’s kingdom, because in that kingdom each one of us is Abba’s beloved child? What if the kingdom is a place where we don’t get what we deserve (thank God!), but rather what our loving Mommy and Daddy God wants so much to

- give us? What if God's infinite love and grace and mercy, all of it, is poured out on each one of us and no matter how much *you* get, all of it is still available to *me*? What if everybody gets the best seat in God's kingdom because we all get the place that is especially prepared for us? So why would we want to trade places with anyone?
- ✦ If this is the kind of kingdom for which we pray, "thy kingdom come," then it is up to us to help make it happen, insofar as it is possible, here on earth. What if we really forgave others their trespasses, in the knowledge that God forgives us, and them? What might happen if we were to stop worrying about whether we are getting our fair share and instead recognized each of our brothers and sisters as God's beloved child?
 - ✦ What if we tried to make sure that every child of God had enough, too?
 - ✦ What would be the results if we made ourselves available to be the instruments of God's love to these other children of God, not worrying about what they did or did not deserve?
 - ✦ What if we would earnestly pray that God would show us how God wants to use us, and would listen, and would act accordingly?
 - ✦ Know what? That's what the kingdom of heaven is like.
 - ✦ And so we pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."
 - ✦ May it be so. On earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, "Ninevites and Ne'er-do-wells," Gospel Medicine, 1995.

http://money.cnn.com/2011/09/13/news/economy/poverty_rate_income/