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Exodus 16:2-15

2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

4 Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. 5 On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” 6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, 7 and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?” 8 And Moses said, “When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.”

9 Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” 10 And 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. 11 The 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.’”

13 In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?”^[a] For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

Matthew 20:1-16

The Laborers in the Vineyard

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage,^[a] he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 6 And 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?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8 When 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.’ 9 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.[b] 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.[c] 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, ‘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.’ 13 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?[d] 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’[e] 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”[f]

Whine and Bread: Tales of an Unfair God

It’s just not fair!

How often have we heard these words – from a toddler or a teenager, from an angry coworker or a jilted friend? It’s just not fair. He got more than me. She got the promotion even though I’ve worked there longer.

My parents are moving me away from all of my friends. Why doesn’t he love me back? It’s just not fair. And, I don’t know about you, but the response I got from my parents was always, “Well, who ever said life was fair?”

And it's true. Life is often not fair. We all have stories. The big-hearted kindergarten teacher, wife, and mother who dies of breast cancer leaving behind teenage daughters and a grieving spouse. The parents who desperately want a child, joyously announce the news that – thanks to much expense and medical intervention - they are expecting twins, only to lose them a few weeks later. On the flip side – the person who pushes ahead in line and receives a prize for being the 10,000th customer. The classmate who cheats and gets a college scholarship. The manager who abuses her employees and is rewarded for *their* hard work.

But, at least we have God, right? Humans are prone to sin and generally rotten behavior, but God will see us through. God will be fair, right? I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but today's scripture readings point to the opposite. God is just not fair. Wait a minute, you might be thinking. I know life's not fair. I know I deal with unfairness in my family, in my work, in my friendships, in the fact that somebody else took my favorite parking spot or my favorite place in the pew this morning. But, God? You're telling me God's not fair?

I promise. It's going to be ok. Just hang with me for a few minutes.

Let's think about these two stories.

The Israelites have been freed from bondage in Egypt. God sent Moses to convince Pharaoh to let them go, and when that didn't work, God sent plague after plague as a ...negotiating technique. Pharaoh relents, finally, but changes his mind the minute the caravan gets underway. So God provides an epic escape route. Then, God sends a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night – a sort of holy GPS to guide their way. But barely six weeks into their journey, the grumbling has already begun. “I'm hungry. I'm tired. Are we there yet? I wanna go back!” Imagine this image with me for a moment. Moses and Aaron are sitting in the front seat of the family minivan. They're taking the kids on a road trip to Disney World. They pull all kinds of strings to get the time off work. They scrimp and save – cutting out all of their little luxuries for a year – to afford the trip, while still making sure the kids have their piano lessons and soccer teams paid for. They leave bright and early in the morning, and by the time they get to the Indiana border, the kids are bouncing off the walls and complaining about how tired and bored and hungry they are. Amid the cries of “Is there even gonna be Wifi at

Disney?” Moses sighs and looks at Aaron and Aaron turns and says, “I will turn this car around right now and you can just forget about Disney World!” And, you know what? *That* would be fair. It would have been completely fair for God to have Aaron and Moses lead the Israelites right back to their enslaved conditions and the fleshpots they missed so much. But that’s not what God instructed Aaron and Moses to do. The abundantly generous God provided what they needed. Exactly what they needed to get through each day. Some ignored the call to gather only what was needed and gathered more. They worked harder and longer, and – as seems fair – had an abundance of manna to show for it at the end of the day. But...in the morning, they found that their stockpile was spoiled and full of worms. Not fair.

Turning to the New Testament, we have what is traditionally called “The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.” It’s a fairly straightforward story. We have a guy that owns a vineyard. He needs some help harvesting his grapes, so he heads down to the local market where people in need of work congregate waiting to be hired. When he arrives,

he sees a few workers and he negotiates with them to pay the going daily rate. The work begins, and a few hours pass. He heads back down to the market, and sees some more folks looking for work. He sends them out to the vineyard as well, promising to pay them what is right. I want to point out a couple of things here. The NRSV says that he “found others standing idle in the marketplace.” The Greek word used here is better translated “without work.” So – he found others without work in the marketplace and hired them, promising to pay what was right. No negotiation. No contract. Not even a specific amount – just what is right. Notice, too, that there is no mention of why he hires them. Does he actually need more workers? It doesn’t say. It simply says that he saw people without work and he gave them work, promising to pay them for their work. He does this two more times. Finally, as the day draws to a close, he makes one more visit to the market and again sees people waiting for work. He asks them why they are standing there without work, and they simply answer “Because no one has hired us.” So – he sends them, too, to his vineyard to work. Notice, here, that there isn’t even a mention of compensation for their work. He promises them

nothing. Perhaps they went to do the hour of labor thinking it would give them a better shot at getting hired for a full day's work the next day. But when he calls the workers to pay them for their labor, he calls these late-comers first and gives them a full day's pay. The workers who had been there all day get excited thinking that if those people who barely did anything are going to get a day's wage, surely they can expect a massive bonus! That would be fair. It makes sense to us. Those who work longer and harder at the same job should be paid more, right? But, that's not what happens. The landowner pays them the same daily rate he paid the laborers who only worked an hour. When the first laborers see this, they begin to grumble. It's not fair. Why did they get the same amount we got? They don't want equal treatment, they want to be treated better. In Jesus' day, it was common for day laborers to stand at the city gates and marketplaces, looking for work to supply their daily needs. Not all employers were honest, and some would hire a laborer for a day and then refuse to pay him until later – an unfair practice that threatened to send the “working poor” into debt and starvation. The Torah is full of instructions to care for the poor, and to pay what is fair. In this parable,

though, the problem is not that the employer disregarded the teachings of the Torah. Instead, he went above and beyond what the law required – paying some of his workers a day’s wage for less than a day’s work. It is this generosity and extravagance that causes the other workers to grumble.

I read an article this week about the placement of this parable in the Gospel of Matthew. The author suggested that the parable occurs in this place in Matthew intentionally. “In chapter 19, the “rich young ruler” asks Jesus what he must do to have eternal life. And Jesus responds with an answer that should make every middle-class Christian shudder. Of course, the young man goes away grieving, “for he had many possessions.” It seems as though the young man had labored all day like some of the workers in Jesus’ parable, keeping the commands of Torah while at the same time amassing possessions and wealth. He had done nothing wrong. And yet he still missed the point, that God’s generosity surpasses that which we can earn. It is precisely because of God’s generosity that such a person can be free to give up his or her worldly possessions.”

Immediately after this, Peter points out that the disciples have done what Jesus asked of the rich young man. They dropped everything and followed Jesus. So Peter asks the natural question – “Jesus – we are doing what you asked already. What do we get?” Peter has missed the point. God is not in the business of keeping score. Jesus tells him that, yes, he and the other disciples will be rewarded...but so will every other person who follows him. And many who were last on earth will be first in heaven. It is in this context that he then relates the story of the workers in the vineyard.

God’s generosity is not fair. It is an abundant generosity that changes how we see the world. This is not a God who “helps those who help themselves.” This is a God who calls us to show special care for those on the margins of society. This is a God who asks us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This is a God who asks us to put aside ideas of scarcity and to share from our abundance. Even if that abundance is as small as the two coins offered by the widow in yet another story.

And, frankly, that does not seem fair. But it is how God's economy works. In this economy of grace and abundance, all workers received the pay they needed in order to survive, even if it seemed unfair to those who had worked all day. The economy of grace – a system in which all enjoy the grace of receiving what the Creator gives and bear the responsibility not to take more than is needed. Wide gaps between rich and poor are not part of God's plan, and God's people are called to be part of God's generosity so that all have enough on which to live.

I spent yesterday morning with a group of folks from First Pres, painting a house in the Vine Street neighborhood. As I painted, I watched God's economy play out around me. Some people had been a part of this project from the very beginning, but were unable to actively paint. Some people showed up that day, not really knowing much about the project, but knowing there was a need and that they knew which end of a paintbrush to dip in the can. Some were literally painting professionals who had actually done this for a living. Some showed up just long

enough to drop off food for the workers. Some worked for just a few hours, and some stayed all day in the blazing heat. And all were afforded the same reward – a sense of community with each other and with our neighbors, and the knowledge that the sacrifice of time and energy that they made allowed for the lifting up of another. This is what God’s economy looks like. This is what the kin-dom of God looks like. And it’s just not fair.

If you have a pen or a pencil near you, write those words in your bulletin. “It’s just not fair.” Now, share your pen or pencil with someone near you. Ok. Now, look at those words. I am going to teach you the importance of a well-placed comma. Ruth Mosher – I hope you like this! After the word “just,” put a comma. Now what do we have? “It’s just, not fair.” The same four words, but a completely different statement. As the choir sang this morning, we need to Sing to the Lord a New Song. We need to change our tune. Instead of “God is just not fair,” we need to say that “God is just, not fair.”

And that's the point I want to make about God this morning. God is not fair. God is just. And justice sometimes means that those who have more, give more. God's endless abundance results in endless generosity and grace. Yes, our resources are finite, but the reality is that some people's resources are more finite than others. In the story of the generous landowner, Jesus calls us to live into the image of God in which we are created. Give to each according to *our* ability and *their* need. It doesn't make sense. It isn't fair. But it is what we are called to do. As one of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott says, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace --only that it meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us." We have an opportunity to participate in that incredible mystery. We have an opportunity to cooperate with God's provision of the daily needs of all of God's children. God is just, not fair. May we be so, too. Amen.