How is this Fair?

As a child I found myself perplexed by this parable. How was it fair? If I had been one of those laborers who worked all day and got the same as those who had worked for an hour I would be grumbling too! Children, of course, tend to have a highly developed sense of justice. They have a keen eye for the imperfectly divided sandwich and the unequally distributed treats. The first sentence of many children, I have no doubt, is “No fair!” And just try to convince a three-year-old that a dime is just as much money as two nickels in spite of the fact that there are *two* nickels and they are larger! But I suspect most of us would also question the actions of the owner. Even if technically it was the right of the owner to stick to his bargain with the early hires and overpay the later ones, it seems unjust. As a labor lawyer acquittance once said to me after a sermon on this text, “I wouldn’t want to represent that guy.”

Adults are every bit as adept at noticing slights and injustices, favoritism and entitlement as children--I certainly am. And it is just as galling now as it was when I was a kid. Within our extended families, our workplaces, our friendships, our most intimate relationships, even within our church, we may feel we are getting less, being left behind, treated unfairly, ignored. It can make us—and everybody around us—miserable. Now, it must be acknowledged that sometimes we *do* get less, *are* left behind, treated unfairly, and ignored. Sometimes we are quite right to be angry and hurt. But not always. I have learned to trust my instincts when I am outraged at the unfair treatment of someone else—but to be leery when my own sense of entitlement is punctured. On the other hand, if we are benefitting from the way things are, we tend not to notice.

So, what are we to make of this strange and disturbing story? As always, we have to ask ourselves where it comes in the larger story. Context really is everything! Last week someone posted a picture of a Christian calendar that had an inspirational quote that ran as follows: “If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine”, Luke 4:7. Some of you have already gotten it. It sounds wonderful until you realize that this was the Devils statement to Jesus during his temptation! Taking that statement out of context and turning it into calendar fodder makes a mockery of its real meaning. The same is true with this parable—it isn’t about labor relationships. It is part of a longer narrative raising serious questions about what it ultimately means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Back in Matthew 19 a string of incidents begin that brings this question to the fore. People bring children to Jesus for blessing. The disciples are annoyed. They are important people with important things to do. They don’t have time for children. The kingdom of God is coming! They are heading up to Jerusalem! Blessing children is not on the agenda—but Jesus rebukes them: “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Immediately after this a young man comes to Jesus with a question about obtaining eternal life. The disciples must have thought, “Now this is more like it! No more snotty nosed kids. This guy is young, pious and, perhaps most important—rich! Just the kind of guy we need in out disciple band.” In the end, Jesus turns him away. The disciples are gob smacked. They are used to thinking that wealth and power are a sign of God’s blessing. And here Jesus is telling them almost the opposite! “It is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.” You can almost hear the whine in Peter’s voice when he declares, “We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?”

On the other side of the parable Jesus predicts his death for a third time—something the disciples have already heard twice but studiously ignored. Immediately after this Jesus is approached by the mother of James and John asking for her sons, her precious boys, to sit one on the right and one on the left when Jesus comes into his kingdom. It becomes clear that James and John are behind this when Jesus responds to them rather than their mother. You can imagine the conversation. “Listen mom, it’ll sound bad if we ask for the places on the right and left. Jesus likes you, so why don’t you ask him. We’ll try to look humble and gracious in our victory.” But Jesus isn’t fooled. He asks them are you able to drink the cup I am going to drink? They don’t hesitate, “We can.” The King James has them say, “We are able”. This gave rise to an old hymn that perhaps some of you once sang—it is in the red hymnal for those keeping track. The chorus is a rousing march that has the singers declare, “Lord we area able! Our spirits are thine; remold them make us, like thee divine. Thy guiding radiance above us shall be, a beacon to God, to love and loyalty.” The irony of course is that in the end they were not able. As you know the disciples forsook him and fled, as, not doubt did many over the years who bellowed out that song.

Be that as it may, the other disciples were not pleased with James and John. Each of them, no doubt was hoping he would be the ones on the right or the left! After all, they had been with Jesus from the beginning just like James and John. Who did they think they were to claim preference? Jesus once more patiently tries to explain that his way of leading is very different. In his kingdom leadership is not some top down operation as it was with the kings of the gentiles. No. It is from the bottom, servanthood. And it is cross shaped. This is , of course, another one of those things that the church his historically solemnly acknowledged and studiously ignored. Throughout history there has been precious little that was remotely servant like about much if not most church leadership.

The chapter ends with the story of a blind beggar who, very much like the children in the first story, demands Jesus attention much to the annoyance of the crowd and disciples. Jesus and the disciples were heading out of Jericho up to Jerusalem, they didn’t have time for a grubby beggar shouting on the side of the road! Once again Jesus demonstrates that his priorities are different. He stops his journey, calls the man, listens to him, and heals him. Matthew tells us that he acted out of compassion and the newly seeing man immediately joined him as a disciple.

Right in the middle of this series of incidents is our parable: Children, Rich Young Man, Parable, James and John, the blind beggar. It doesn’t take too much imagination to see that the parable has something to say about these incidents, the nature of discipleship, and Christian leadership. At the end of the parable the owner says something that perhaps helps us to understand the entire narrative arc of this section of the gospel. “Are you envious,” the owner asks, “because I am generous?” Literally, “is your eye evil” because I am generous. This parable is, then, about envy—it is not a primer on labor relations or farm management. As such it would be a disaster. Good luck on hiring workers for the next day after word of this got around! No. It is a shocking, powerful way to bring to consciousness the corrosive power of envy, of resentment, of entitlement. A thing that destroys more relationships, families and communities than nearly anything else.

In some ways this parable is like Luke’s parable of the Prodigal Son. The whole point of that parable comes at the end when the elder brother, jealous and resentful of his wastrel younger brother refuses to come to the party. The younger brother, you see, doesn’t’ deserve the party! He squandered and wasted his resources, humiliated his father and shamed his family. Not even he thought he deserved to be taken back. So the elder brother pouts and stays away. It was not fair! It was not just! The problem, of course, was that the elder brother thought himself entitled to preferential treatment. Like the men in our parable he had kept on working in the fields day after day, bearing the heat of the sun while his brother cavorted with prostitutes. He resented, as they did, what he perceived as unjust treatment. He deserved more; they deserved more! The Father, the land-owner—God--for of course it is of God we speak, was not fair.

This is all very human thing, isn’t it. “I have worked so hard for God; I have been so faithful, so good. Why aren’t things working out for me? Why isn’t God doing great things for me.” I call this the Christmas letter syndrome. You know what I mean. Every year you get one of those Christmas letters that suggests “My life is so much more interesting and exciting that yours.” It is hard not to be envious. Someone will write, “We spent the summer in Paris after Christopher graduated Summa Cum Laude in economics from Harvard. We were visiting Julia who was finishing up her Rhodes Scholarship and heading for additional studies at the Sorbonne. Jim was taking some time off before he began his new role as CEO of a fortune 500 company. We hope to get back after the decorators are done putting the finishing touches on our new addition.” You know the type of thing. Meanwhile your kid graduated Laude How Come from Moo U and has a summer job delivering pizzas and you are hoping to get to the Dells for a weekend. And you have done far more for the church, for God than these people ever have! And so it goes.

At the end of John’s gospel there is a famous scene where Jesus warns Peter that the days are coming when he will be forced to go where he really doesn’t want to go. The evangelist notes that “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.” Facing this rather unpleasant eventuality, Peter seeing John walking by asks, in effect, “what about him?” Perhaps hoping that John’s fate would be far worse! Perhaps he was hoping Jesus would say, “Well, if you think your death is going to be bad, wait’ll you hear about his!” But Jesus tells him, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” In effect, “None of your business Peter. Get on with being a disciple. Get on with the work of God’s kingdom. Get on with making that kingdom present.

Throughout its history the church has been plagued with envy and resentment; it has been cursed by a sense of entitlement; it has sometimes demanded primacy for the old order. Sometimes it has despised the old, ignored tradition and fostered new entitlements and resentments to replace the old. It seems a never-ending battle born of resentment, fear, and scarcity—as if there is not enough of the grace of God to go around. It began with Jewish Jesus followers resenting the parvenu Gentile Jesus followers and then Gentile Jesus followers sneering at the stuffy, legalistic Jewish Jesus followers; it continued with Eastern Christians excoriating Western Christians, Celtic Christians denouncing Roman Christians, and, of course, the reforming Christians denouncing Rome and then, inevitably, each other. Today liberals and conservatives sneer at each other; hymn signer and chorus singers roll their eyes at each other; young and old don’t understand each other; and we are shattered by issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Each side thinks they are God’s preferred ones. Each side thinks it unfair that the other gets attention, resource, recognition, and praise. And to each one God asks, “is your eye evil because I am generous?”

For this is what it is about, isn’t it? It is about God’s generosity and our fears of divine scarcity. We still think our dime is less than her two nickels and that his piece of pie is larger than mine. We still find it really difficult to celebrate God’s generosity toward the late comers. Jesus’ disciples resented the mothers and children, the blind beggars, and each other. They imagined that God would bless them because they were first, they had suffered the most, they had been there from the beginning. But God’s vision was different. He was interested not just in those who had been there from the beginning—I did not come for the righteous, Jesus said, but the sinners! He was not interested in setting up his disciples as imperious autocrats ruling the community with an iron fist. Not at all. In fact God has a thing for the weak and miserable, the blind beggars and dissolute sons, the Gentile women and poor widows, the least, the lost and the losers. I came, Jesus said elsewhere, to seek and to save that which was lost.

In the end, this is a parable of God’s grace; God’s startling and irritating generosity to those we think undeserving. Like the older brother, like the workers in the vineyard, like the other disciples regarding James and John we may find it all irritating and unfair. But in the end, I don’t think we really want God to be fair! At least I don’t. I want that grace of God. I know I don’t deserve it. But not only do I receive it, I have the opportunity to share it, to distribute it, to tell all those who imagine they deserve nothing that can they have everything. I have, you have the opportunity to *be* the grace of God for someone living on the edges of life and community. And that, perhaps, is the greatest gift of all.

Amen.