

“Grace is not Attractive”
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Matthew 20:1-16

“That’s not fair!” Scientists differ on the age children begin to understand the concept of fairness. Some say the capacity develops around preschool, but a recent study shows that even babies can recognize unequal treatment. Dr. Jessica Sommerville of the University of Washington, had babies watch videos of crackers and milk being shared out. She said, “The infants expected an equal and fair distribution, and they were surprised to see one person given more crackers or milk than the other.”

“It’s not fair!” When I used to say that, my mom would promptly respond, “The Fair’s in August.” My mom grew up on a farm. The fair *was* in August.

How do you respond to your children or grandchildren when they exclaim, “it’s not fair!” in an oh so pleasant tone.

Have any of you used the classic come back, “Well, Life’s not fair!” As adults, we know this to be true. We’ve seen it. We’ve experienced it for ourselves: When the person at the peak of physical fitness and wellness drops dead of stroke at age 50, but the chain smoker addicted to ‘cronuts’ lives to the ripe old age of 92. When someone gets a job or position not because of *what* they know, but *who* they know. When corporations find loopholes in the tax code or skip the country all together to avoid paying their share. “That’s not fair!”

We have an innate sense of what is fair and what is not. In secret, we all wish that *Karma* really ruled the universe, Or, in the world of the parable for today—that, at the end of the day—if a laborer was overpaid for their work that on the way home their mule-cart would break down. That would even the scales!

This is a *terrible parable*. I’ve been wrestling with it all week, and no matter what way I spun it—it just kept upsetting me.

There stands the early morning shift with their hand out, waiting for their pay. They have toiled and gotten sunburned and back ached and bruised, pruning or picking or whatever it is you do in a first century vineyard. They are tired. Ready to bring home their hard-earned subsistence living to their families. And they get their one denarius, and if that *was* the story, we wouldn’t have a problem. That was justice on the part of the landowner: behaving according to what is right and fair.

But then, that isn’t the story, is it. The story goes, by the time the early shift had gotten paid they saw those who worked 2 hours, 5 hours, 8 and 9(!) hours less than

them receive the exact same amount of coinage that now lay in their palm. I can feel the indignation rising in my throat on their behalf. The frustration. The anger.

logic of grace—of the unmerited gift—is not attractive.

Most of us, like the logic of justice. Things we can earn and that are fair (and we can control?) It is comforting and nice to be able to tell our children that they live in a world where hard work pays off. It's a common tune:

*You put your hard work in,
You get the scholarship,
Go to the best of schools,
And get the dream job.*

*You get the spouse, the house, a girl-and-boy
The boat, the cabin, and all the joys;
That's what it's all about.*

(or is that the Hokey-pokey?).

Work hard. *Earn* much. Earn not just money. Respect on merit. Good things don't come to those who wait...but to those who work their tails off! Am I right? That's meritocracy. Meritocracy--There's a big word I came across this week. Meritocracy, a system, where if you work hard you can achieve great things. Its where many of us would like to believe we live in this great country. It's the basis of the American ethos. That's fair. That's a just system.

But what if--what if that's not *God's* system. What if God didn't get the memo about meritocracy, and God doesn't care about Karma. Didn't set heaven in tiers for the progressively righteous by the five star system. The worker in the vineyard who had the privilege of working all day, in God's economy, does not achieve more. They achieve enough. And the ones who would have expected far less, receive a gift unimaginable.

Jesus, as he told this parable, has just gotten done talking to a rich young ruler, who thought he could achieve prime place in heaven by working to follow all the commandments, and then within a few moments, his disciples are found jockeying to sit as his 'right hand in heaven.' Maybe the reason Christ told this story is because he could see from the people around him how easy it is to believe that we are what we achieve; that we are worth our net worth or something along those lines.

Working hard to achieve something is not a bad thing. But we need to recognize that it comes with a mindset that can cost us much. We may find ourselves thinking:

"I just need to work harder in order to impress the boss, get the promotion, have the perfect home, perfect kids, perfect life..."

I just need to work harder to get my life together, to stay organized, to be balanced, to find happiness.

Sometimes, it is just not possible to work hard and earn much, and the 'American dream' is not your reality. Disability, lack of job prospects, disadvantaged upbringing, status of citizenship. Life *is* messy and unpredictable and often sends us two steps back for every one step forward. And when meritocracy is the reigning value within us, the self-talk can move from "*I just need to work harder...*" to a form of despair that says, "I'm just not (good, perfect, powerful, smart, successful) enough."

"I'm not enough!"

Thanks be to God, for this terrible parable. Where the kingdom of heaven is a place where *whether* you achieve your high dreams by working your tail off, *or*, if you've ended up short of that for whatever reason: **you are enough**. You are enough to earn the attention and the gifts of the owner of the vineyard. Christ says. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Your are enough.

If we could only see ourselves the way...Jesus, or at least our grandma did or does.

If we could only talk to ourselves in the way we'd talk to a good friend when they were down.

There just is no way to merit this ultimate thing. We can not earn our own value because it is intrinsic to us and to every human who has breath. Knowing and believing it, believing it, then living your life without the masks or armor or games? Those are different things.

The landowner, speaks back to the indignant early shift-worker, who thought they were more equal than those they had worked with. He says, "Are you envious because I am generous? Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

What belongs to God is mercy. We are wise to stop trying to earn what is given to us as gift.

As it turns out life's not fair. *And neither is God!* God is inexplicably, frustratingly, generous.

Grace is not attractive. What a terrible parable, indeed.
