

The Message for September 18, 2011
Philippians 4:10-14 & Matthew 20:1-16
It Isn't Fair! Isn't That Great?
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Life is not fair. That can be good news or bad news depending on where you're standing in line.

Picture this: You're standing in line at the checkout counter and there are five people in front of you. You are the last person in line and the store manager comes over and says to you, "Come this way. We've just opened up another cashier. You can go first." Is that good news or bad news?

You might think, "How awesome, that's good news" but what about the people who were standing in line before you. They may not be thinking – "how awesome." They would be thinking of a few other choice words.

Picture this: You run into the Dutch Way Grocery Store to grab a few items on the way home. You get to the checkout lines only to discover that several of them are closed even the "10 items or less line" is closed. The ones that are open have at least 6 people all waiting in line with full carts. It just isn't fair that you should have to wait so long to check out with just a few items.

But then it goes from bad to worse. Just when you are next in line to check out, the cashier tells you that this line will closing and you need to go to another register. "I've only got three items," you whined. "Sorry, it's time for my break," the cashier says.

Life is not fair, and neither is God. That can be good news or bad news depending on where you are standing in line. That's what Jesus is telling us in today's parable. Listen to this...

Read Matthew 20:1-16

Picture this: The owner of a vineyard needs to bring in the harvest. So he goes looking to hire day-laborers to get the work done. At 6:00 in the morning he hires a crew and promises each one a denarius, the common pay for a full day's work (around - \$50). The crew agrees, and off they go into the vineyard. We have places in our country that have migrant workers who are hired in this way.

At around 9:00, noon and 3:00 in the afternoon, the owner of the vineyard sees more laborers standing idle and offers to put them to work, promising to pay them whatever is fair. The crew agrees, and off they go into the vineyard.

What the owner does next is a bit strange. He sees the sun beginning to set and realizes that there is still more harvesting to be done. He can't stand to see idle workers. We don't know why, but oddly enough the vineyard owner goes out at 5:00 in the afternoon and hires yet another crew of laborers and sends them into the vineyard.

What happened next is really bizarre. One hour later, at 6:00 in the afternoon, it's Miller Time -- quitting time. Time to pay the laborers, but instead of paying them in the order they were hired, the owner of the vineyard insists that the laborers be paid in reverse order. Much to their surprise and delight these laborers are paid \$50, a full day's pay for just one hour of work.

Well, we can all picture what happens next. All the laborers standing in line start doing the math...

If they worked for three hours, they should get paid \$150.

If they worked for six hours, they should get paid \$300.

If they worked for nine hours, they should get paid \$450.

And if they worked the full day, they should be paid \$600! That would only be fair, right?

But that isn't how things go. Each laborer gets exactly what they've been promised. Now what seemed fair at the beginning of the day doesn't seem so fair anymore. The owner of the vineyard isn't fair. The owner is faithful.

Jesus is not teaching a business lesson here. He is not telling us how to run a successful vineyard with unhappy workers. He is saying something profoundly important about God, and about us.

Jesus is saying that life is not fair and God isn't fair either, at least not by our definition of fairness. Fairness is about people getting what they deserve, but that's not how life is lived in the Kingdom of God. In fact, God values *grace* and *mercy* not fairness.

Grace and mercy means giving people what they don't deserve. We don't deserve to be loved or forgiven. We don't deserve what we've been given. But because God values faithfulness over fairness, we are given God's steadfast love and unconditional forgiveness. We are blessed with life because God is not fair, God is faithful.

I often wonder why was I born in this country at this time and not some where else in the world? I had no say about when I would be born or where I would be born or why I was born the way I was born. My life is truly a blessing from God. I hope you can say that too. My life is truly a blessing from God.

We are blessed by God. Life is a gift – an undeserved gift – a gift of grace and mercy from God. Everything we have, everything we are all gifts from God.

Whether you are new to the faith and the church and the kingdom work we share together or if you've been part of this work all of your life — whether we're obedient or not — God's grace and mercy are yours in this place.

God is not fair. God is faithful. That's what Jesus is telling us about God.

But Jesus is also saying something important about us. He's pointing out our tendency to compare ourselves with others to focus on what we don't have as we stand in the line of life. We can easily become discontent. Rather than being grateful for what God has already provided. We can easily see what others have and wonder why they have more than we do.

That kind of thinking can lead to bad behavior, spending money we don't really have on things we don't really need to impress people we don't really like.

Do you know why so many of us personally and why all of us nationally are in the midst of this debt crisis? The answer is simple: sin and our lack of trust which grows from the seeds of envy and greed. We want more. We see what others have and we say — it's not fair. We forget to trust God and God's ways of living. We would much rather live in sin. We need to find a way to keep our sin in check.

A few months ago I was talking with a guy and we were discussing old cars. I said it's my dream to someday have a '65 or '66 mustang fastback and fix it up. He said, "I have one."

"What?!?!" I said.

"Yeah I haven't driven it in years."

A week later I was eyeing-up his Fastback Mustang in an old barn. It was covered with an inch of dust and dirt. I saw a thing of beauty — all original. He paid \$1500 for it back in the '70's. I've been scheming — I mean dreaming — of how I can get that car for myself...

I say that somewhat jokingly but the truth is if I'm not careful my envy and my greed can get the best of me.

Now I need to tell you that a couple months ago I blew up the engine in our Mazda Tribute. I was on my way to Harrisburg to visit a couple who needed some counseling. I officiated at their wedding last year and since then they moved to Harrisburg. They needed help sorting some things out in their relationship.

On my way to their house the engine in the Mazda Tribute blew-up and I was stranded south of Harrisburg. I called Triple A. They arrived and brought me and the Tribute back to Myerstown on a flatbed truck.

Since then it's been at a local garage, then hauled to the Mazda dealership and now it's been hauled back to our house. The garage couldn't/wouldn't fix it. The dealership wanted \$5600 to put a new engine in it but the Kelly Blue Book says the

vehicle is only worth \$6000. So I have this bright idea that I'll just put a new engine in myself. That was three months ago. It still isn't fixed. Ask me – why isn't it fixed yet?

Well... because I had this other bright idea to have the engine in my '65 mustang rebuilt instead. The exhaust needed replaced and I thought I should fix the heads at the same time. I took the heads into the machine shop and they found some bearing material in them, which suggested the whole engine needed rebuilt. So I had them rebuild it. I just got it running this week and I drove it here this morning. It runs great. It didn't really need to be rebuilt right now I just wanted it done.

Did I mention our Mazda Tribute is sitting in front of our house waiting for a new engine?

Folks all joking aside I have a disease. It's called – sin. We all do and we all need to keep our sin in check.

I need to also tell you that there are times when I look at what I have – the cars, the house, the neighbors, the friends, my family, my wife, this community of faith -- I give thanks to God for all the blessings in my life. There are times when I catch myself and I wonder -- why my life is so blessed. It's not a perfect life. It's not a fair life. But it is a blessed life.

Can you say that? That's why it's embarrassing to tell you how many times my mind wanders with envy and greed -- dreaming and scheming about how I could add to my old car collection.

Does something like that happen to you? Maybe not with old cars, but maybe with something else, maybe a new car, or clothes, or home, or boat, or some other kind of thing?

Envy and greed are the bars of a prison. But gratitude is the key that unlocks that prison door setting us free to trust in God's abundance and God's faithfulness. Jesus came to set us free, and the Holy Spirit calls us to live into that freedom of God's abundance and faithfulness.

In our second reading for today (**Philippians 4:10-14**) we need to hear these words from St. Paul, who writes.

“I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty or of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

St. Paul has discovered that faith in Christ gives birth to contentment, and peace, and to a life that keeps envy and greed in check. No matter how much or how little Paul had, he trusted God to provide, and God's grace was enough for Paul.

I want to be like Paul who was content, and freed to live generously. Paul saw himself blessed to be a blessing to others. I want to be a blessing to others.

How about you? Are you content? Honestly? Are you a disgruntled worker, crabby about the unfairness of life, or are you content, delighted at the wonderful unfairness of God? Are you free to live generously, free to give generously of yourself and share what God has placed in your care?

Amber and I do not give generously because we have to. We give generously because we want to. We've been set free by Christ to do so. We see ourselves as the conduit of God's generosity, not the reservoir. We are blessed and we want to be a blessing to others. We are filled with joy knowing that lives are being changed for the sake of the Kingdom of God right here, and around the world, through our giving. I hope you'll share that joy and give faithfully and generously to the kingdom work we are being called to do in this place.

Give not because the church needs it. Give because we need to share what God has shared with us.

Life is a gift. We didn't earn it. We don't deserve it. We have it because of God's grace and mercy flowing into our lives. We are blessed by God to be a blessing to others. How are we doing?

Truth is -- life is not fair. And neither is God. God is faithful and that is good news no matter where you are standing in line.

I want to end this message with a video entitled, "The Gift of Generosity"
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhmmeFuzGRk&feature=player_embedded.

May you be a gift of generosity to someone this day and every day this week.
Amen.