

Where Do You Stand?

A sermon by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field, St. Peter's Church
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At this point in the church year we are deep in the parade of Matthew's parables that really, nobody likes. We all nod sagely when we hear them because, well, it is Jesus who is saying them, but we don't really like them one bit. Jesus just doesn't seem to get it—the way the world works is that the first are first and the last are last and, it's a shame and all, but someone has to be last so there it is—just glad it's not me. The way Jesus wants to order things is, just, well, at heart, it's not fair.

Jesus tells the parable of the day laborers immediately after Peter has asked him what reward the disciples will get for following him—clearly hoping for at least 100,000 frequent flyer miles. Jesus response is a much less than satisfying “many that are first will be last and the last first,” which doesn't sound like much of a reward to me. And immediately *after* this parable we have James and John's Mum asking Jesus to give her sons the best seats, thrones even, in the Kingdom. Imagine her confusion and disappointment when he points out that where he is headed the throne will be wood and nails, not rubies and gold. Both of these stories hold up the deep desire many of us have to be first; first in line for the buffet, the movies, at the bar. Take a moment and imagine yourself, having scored tickets to Hamilton—box seats, no less. Excited you show up early and are first in line. Woohoo! 10 minutes before the doors open the staff comes out and tells everyone the line is being shuffled—those in the back, move to the front. Oh, and tickets are being reshuffled too—box seats are now upper balcony, back row. How unfair! Why?

In Jesus' story, it appears the manager just felt like being generous. He started the day by driving to the street corner where all the men looking for work were hanging out—in hope. And he hired what he thought was the right number of people. But around noon it became clear that he didn't have enough help, so he hopped in his truck, went back to the street corner, and hired a few more day laborers. This happened again at 3 and at 5, one hour before the end of the workday. When the truck with the last folks hired gets back to the vineyard, the others are just finishing up, sweat dripping off them, exhausted from working in the blazing sun for over 8 hours. And up rolls this truck, filled with non-sweaty, peppy workers—who help out for about half an hour. Then it is pay time. The line forms—likely carefully ordered so that those who worked longest are up front, right where they belong, getting their full reward. The latecomers, those in the back are craning their necks to see what is going on up front. The manager, oddly, starts not right at the front but with someone who showed up at 3. When he gets paid handsomely, excitement ripples up and down the line—those who were there all day busily calculating how much they will get based on what they saw the dude who worked for 3 hours get. But when the first of those who worked ALL DAY gets paid the same as the slacker who putzed around for 3 hours, the crowd turns on the manager. He calmly explains that he has paid them what they had agreed on and then asks, “Do you begrudge my generosity?”

You bet we do. Equal pay for equal work is fair. Equal pay for unequal work is definitely not. Treating everyone the same is fair. Of course, we say this even as we live in a society that most definitely does not treat people the same way, where some start so far back the starting line isn't even in sight. But that is a sermon for another day.

The truth is that life is not fair. Which in many ways makes it more critical, we think, that God is fair—rewarding all according to effort, recognizing the most dedicated among us—those who have worked

our butts off for God. But instead, God seems to have a different metric, handing out the same amount of money to all—starting at the end of the line, where the late comers and least workers are. Not surprisingly, the response to this foolish generosity varies significantly depending on where we are in the line. In the back there are loud “WOOHOOS” and high fives as God distributes disproportionately. In the front there are angry yells and threatening stares. In contemplating this reaction, I’ve decided that our response might just boil down to the question of deserving. If we get more than we deserve, we are psyched. Less, we are infuriated.

What I am always most interested in with Jesus’ parables, is where we, the hearers, put ourselves. I would guess most of us count ourselves among those at the front of the line—those who have worked hard but get cheated, the indignant ones who work our butts off and are not properly rewarded. We’ve been nice to people. Donated to the right causes. Occasionally talked to someone living on the streets. How insulting that we, who have worked so hard, should be treated exactly the same as the slackers who sloped in at the last minute and barely lifted a finger.

But did you ever think about, look at, the line from God’s perspective? What if, from a bird’s eye view of the line of laborers, what if I am actually in the middle of the pack, or even at the end? What if, from God’s perspective, there are all sorts of people ahead of me, crowns studded with far more stars than mine. Maybe it’s not really my fault I am at the back, maybe I didn’t know there was a line until just a few minutes ago. Maybe that wouldn’t have made a difference because I wouldn’t have gotten around to joining the line until now because I had a lot going on, or I got sick, my business failed, my marriage tanked. There are lots of reasons people end up near the end of the line. Perhaps only God can sort them all out.

But, just imagine being at the back of the line, trying to see and hear what is going on at the front, when God’s manager comes to you, the one at the back, first! Hands you an envelope with a big old chunk of cash in it!

For unfathomable reasons, God loves each of us wildly—even unfairly—without regard to effort. And God apparently enjoys dismantling the systems we carefully set up to sort folks into the ones God should love and those best given a wide berth. God seems to want us to know that if we look at life through God’s eyes we might start to question our ideas of fairness, we might start to wonder why we get so riled up when our lines don’t work.

God, it turns out, is not fair. And, depending on line location, this is good news or bad news. But if it is good news, it is powerful good news. It means there is a chance we’ll get more than we deserve, a good chance those of us at the end of the line will make it into the banquet hall after all, not because of who we are, because of what we have done or left undone, but because of who God is.

God, you see, is not fair, what God is, is generous. And when that irritates us, it is only because we have forgotten where we stand. Forgotten that when the pay is handed out, starting at the back of the line, the high fives may well be our own.

*with appreciation for the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor whose thoughts and words influenced this sermon.