

"No Fair!"

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¹For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And 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?' ⁷They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸When 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.' ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, '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.' ¹³But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:1-16)

"No Fair!" If you have ever spent much time around children -- especially children who are siblings in the same family -- I expect you have heard these words before. Maintaining equilibrium and balance between kids of differing ages is difficult, if not outright impossible. Fortunately, I did not have to pay the high emotional price of trying to use an example from my own household to illustrate this principle... first, because that would not have been fair... and secondly, because I found this great book in the library. I want to share this first part of this book with you, and I will take the liberty of adding some personal commentary along the way. I have also enlisted the help of two amateur thespians, who have graciously agreed to help me bring this masterpiece to life...

"No Fair!" by Caren Holtzman. "Warning: This Book Contains Math – And It's Fun!" Now that you have been duly warned...

"Kristy: Let's have a play date at my house."

"David: **No fair!** We had a play date at your house yesterday." [Please. David is not about to suffer that kind of agony again. No XBOX. No cool glass of milk. No after school Hot Pocket. Welcome to Lameville, population Kristy's mom.]

"Kristy: Okay, We'll go to your house." [Justice, thanks be to God, will be served on this day. But let's not get too comfortable just yet, because as soon as we get to David's house...]

"David: Let's play jacks."

"Kristy: Let's play checkers."

"David: Jacks!"

"Kristy: Checkers!" [A vibrant debate is now well and truly joined. For the first time, true conflict enters the story. It is, after all, the hallmark of all great literature. But who will be the hero? Who will prove to be the antagonist in this morality play? David lays claim to hero status first. He grabs a bag of marbles...]

"David: I have an idea. Pick a marble. If you get a yellow marble, we'll play jacks. If you pick a blue marble, we'll play checkers." *[It seems, on its face, to be a fair and brilliant plan: to let fate decide. Kristy, always the pragmatist and also an eternal optimist, is inclined to play along...]*

"Kristy: Okay." *[Kristy reaches into the bag. Tensions mount...]*

"Kristy: It's yellow." *[Jacks it will be. Kristy resigns herself to the loss and resolves to make the best of a tragic situation. But wait, what is this...]*

"Kristy: **No fair!** There are ten yellow marbles and only one blue marble." *[Twist! David, far from a hero, turns out to be a manipulative jerk. He had stacked the deck so that he had a 91% chance of winning. Kristy wasn't supposed to look in the bag. She wasn't supposed to figure out that she was being snookered. But she proved to be a greater adversary than David had thought. Realizing that he had overplayed his hand, David immediately tries to rebuild his position with an artful concession...]*

"David: Okay. Have it your way. Let's play checkers..."¹

It just gets better from there. I will not spoil the rest of the book for you, but I will say that it really heats up after the checkers game.

Even though we've had some fun with it, the book uses an intriguing premise – the idea to use math to teach the concept of fairness, while also using the concept of fairness to teach math. It is essentially the same thing that Jesus does in this frustrating parable about daily wages and God's vision of justice. Jesus uses math to reveal something about God's sense of fairness. Because we tend to sympathize most with the initial hires, because that is where we are most likely to insert ourselves into the story, our initial response is almost certainly "**No fair!**" We see it as a matter of simple math. If one agrees to work for a certain amount per hour, then the greater the number of hours worked the greater the total pay should be. When that is not the way the story turns out, we feel like we've been handed a bag of marbles that is skewed against us. We did not know all the rules, so we feel snookered.

As an initial point, it is worth mentioning that the assumption we make about where we fit into this parable is almost certainly misplaced – at least for us. In its original meaning, the first hires were probably the Jewish people, those who had labored under the law for centuries before Christ came along. Why, they thought, should these newcomers -- the Johnny-come-lately Gentile followers of Christ – be welcomed into the family of God at this late hour? What have they done to earn their status? **No fair!** Note that in this scenario we are the latecomers, the ones who are said to profit disproportionately.

Once we open ourselves to experiencing the story from a number of perspectives, there are several lessons that we can learn about God's mathematics -- and God's sense of fairness -- from this vexing parable. The first is that the economy of the gospel is different than the economy of the world.² The way God adds things up sometimes contradicts the way we would add them up. One of the primary vehicles Jesus uses to teach us these lessons is the parable. Walter Brueggemann, in his influential book *The Prophetic Imagination*, has written that "the dominant culture, now and in every time, is grossly uncritical, cannot tolerate serious and fundamental criticism, and will go to great lengths to stop it."³ Parables seek to pry these locked doors open by challenging our dominant assumptions about the world. They create room for spiritual transformation by turning the normal expectations upside down, and the disruptive lesson we learn in this parable is that God's way of doing business does not necessarily follow the wisdom of human business. As Shelley Douglass of *Sojourner's* has written: "God's economy is not like ours. We hoard and stockpile; we measure out

¹ Carol Holtzman, *No Fair!* New York: Scholastic Books (1997).

² Rev. Thomas A. Sweet, "Finally Comes the Poet," www.firstpresjamestown.com/2007Sermons/finally_comes_the_poet.htm

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1978), p. 14.

the day's pay according to hours worked. God, however, simply sees that there is enough for everyone. Enough manna - but no more. A day's wages - no less.⁴

A related lesson we learn from this parable is that God is free – completely free -- to make other deals with other groups of people. Even as God's people, we do not have an exclusive claim upon God's attention, nor can we dictate the kinds of arrangements that God offers to others. In another context, Jesus said it this way: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."⁵ So, all we can really do is concentrate on our own deal. And when we do, we may remember how good our deal really is. Has God kept his promises to us? Yes. Have we received grace from God, blessings that we had no right to demand? Yes. Are we safe and secure in the flock of the shepherd? Yes. The parable reminds us that we need not bother ourselves with the generous terms given to others out of the boundless well of God's grace. To use the words of Paul Tillich, we should simply "accept the fact that we have been accepted" and be at peace.

The final point to make today is that this radical kind of generosity – a gift that blesses according to God's sense of fairness and not our own -- is not bad news, even for the first workers who labored through the heat of the day. It is radically good news for everyone. It is good news that, in the kingdom of God, blessings are not doled out in a transactional manner – that in the end it will not be about what we have done and how long we have done it, or about what we think we have earned or avoided. It is good news that, in the kingdom of God, the bag of marbles is not stacked against us but for us. It is good news that, in the kingdom of God, everyone receives a blessing, because the next time we might be the ones that arrive late.

Maybe we misread something and got lost for a while. Maybe we were busy doing something we thought was the right thing to do, only to realize at the end of the day that we had gotten it all wrong. We might find that all along, we have all been on a sinking ship, and while we've been running around like wanna-be heroes trying to plug up all the leaks, the smart ones were getting in the line for the lifeboat. If we got up to those boats just before the end, right as the waves were about to slip over the decks and suck the ship down into the depths, then would we not be overjoyed to learn that the One keeping watch over the lifeboats says that there is still room for us? Would our hearts not leap at the sound of the words, "Hop on in, latecomer, because you are coming with us too"?

Maybe, in the end, it isn't truly fair... but that does not mean it is not good news.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

⁴ "Radical Gratitude," http://www.nwumf.org/images/radical_gratitude/year_a/radical_gratitude_sept1508.pdf

⁵ John 10:16