

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 20:1-16

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

September 20, 2020

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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As most of you know, we have a new addition in our house. Tucker Rigsby joined our humble pack of critters 3 weeks ago. He has been a joy. He has embraced his job as church dog with gusto. He knows Cindy always has treats in her desk. He knows he has the most comfortable bed in my office. He loves meeting new people and getting lots of attention. He is what you might call “spoiled rotten.”

But, that’s at church. When he gets home it’s a different story. In the pack, each dog has a very specific role. Rango, the Jack Russell, is the big brother who is always expected to play nicely with the younger sibling. Tucker is the irritating little brother and Bailey, our 80-pound mutt, is the grumpy grandpa. Being the “grandpa”, Bailey has earned a few notches on his belt. He takes his role very seriously. He is indeed the alpha dog above all alpha dogs.

It usually plays out this way...Tucker gets a new toy. Bailey takes it. Tucker gets a new bed. Bailey takes it. Tucker gets a treat. Bailey takes it. Tucker gets attention. Bailey steps between Tucker and his human.

Question...Do you think that’s fair? Of course, not. We can quickly name this type of unfairness as greed or injustice or pettiness...if you can give a dog those qualities, but you get the point. It’s not good.

Now, let me give you another scenario. At home, the kids have to do weekly chores. Things like clean the bathrooms, vacuum, and dust. On a daily basis they have to do things like empty the kitchen trash can, empty the dishwasher, and pick up after themselves. Now, if one of the kids emptied the trash the day before, do you think they are more apt to do it the following day?

Absolutely not. Why? Because to them, that wouldn’t be fair. In their minds, it should be an equal exchange of work. I do it one day, you do it the next.

Faced with this ethical dilemma, Dwayne and I explain it this way...in a family, things aren’t fair. There will be seasons that one of us does more around the house than the other because one is working longer hours or had to go out of town or had more homework to do. And so, we do a little extra when we can. We pick up the slack. We help out.

It’s never a tit for tat equation. Successful relationships don’t work if we constantly judge who did the most or who is more worthy. Next question...Is this kind of system fair? No, not in a transactional way. But...taking care of things when others are unable to do so is what we call love and that makes all the difference. Fair or not.

Our Gospel makes this point so powerfully. The landowner goes out early in the morning looking for people to work in his vineyard. He finds some workers, they agree upon a wage and begin their day's work. The landowner goes out again...at 9, noon, and 3. Each time, he gets more workers and sends them out to work. Then, he goes out again at 5. He finds even more people who need work. He takes them as well and sends them into the vineyard even though the day is almost done.

If the day ends at sunset, how long does each person work? How much does each person get paid at the end of the day? You might assume that they get paid for the hours that they worked. 8 hours pay for 8 hours of work; 1 hour of pay for one hour of work. That would be fair. But, the landowner pays a full day's wages to those whom he picked up at 5pm. The same amount as the people who had worked the entire day.

Was that fair? The folks who had worked all day didn't think so. They were so envious about the landowner's kindness and angry at what they considered to be his blatant unfairness. It makes sense on the surface. But to complicate the picture consider this...did the workers who worked all day have what they needed? We know they received fair pay for the work they had done. So their wage was indeed fair. So, we can assume, they had what they needed.

Yet they couldn't comprehend why the landowner might offer such lavish, unmerited generosity on someone who didn't do as much work. It wasn't fair from their perspective.

Seeing someone get what we think they don't deserve can be hard. But, our Gospel asks us to consider the gift of unmerited generosity that the landowner extends even when it might be unfair by our standards. I would suggest that this overflowing generosity from the landowner, no matter how unfair it may have seemed, came from a place of deep faith. Deep faith in the possibility of kindness. Deep faith in the possibility of opportunity. Deep faith in the possibility of radical, life giving love.

Don't we do that in our families all the time? We keep looking for what our loved ones need, at 9, at noon, at 3 and at 5. We also know that at times, some will get a little more depending on their needs on any given day and some may get less, but in the end when things work well, everyone is taken care of.

You know, I tell the kids often, life isn't fair. And, it isn't. But, what if we turned those unfair moments into opportunities to help out someone else? What if we give up a little of what we think we need to make sure someone else has what they need? What if, when we see a way we can help, we become like the landowner, overflowing with generosity?

Yes, unfairness can sting. And, if we aren't careful, it can be hurtful...like Bailey taking everything away from Tucker. We know that kind of unfairness when we see it. But, unfairness can also be an opening, an opening of our hearts towards compassion, mercy, and grace.

It's that kind of unfairness that makes us stronger as a community, stronger as families, stronger as friends. Let it be for us a way forward, a new way of living, a new way of loving.

Thanks be to God. Amen.