

“No Fair, God!”

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio on Sunday, September 21, 2008.*

Fairness is a concept that is familiar to anyone who has ever raised children or to anyone who has ever *been* a child, for that matter. The matter of the cake that needs to be cut into identical pieces, right down to the number of chocolate chips on the top, seems to be a tradition passed down in every family from generation to generation.

Fairness is an important concept, in this society, of mediating disputes. It's a way of dividing resources, or money, or attention according to some agreed-upon standard, whether that standard is equal slices of cake, or pay according to worth, or getting what you deserve. You may disagree with the particular standard, but standards and rules help families and communities run smoothly.

When we talk about fairness, we assume that the resources, or money, or attention are limited and that a generous portion to one person will result in a meager portion to another—the zero-sum situation. Think about that chocolate cake again. It would not be necessary to take that measuring tape to each piece if there was an infinite supply of chocolate cake. We would just take what we want and that would be that. But if we have learned to see life as some kind of a contest for power, wealth, approval, and fame, we will always be on the alert for things that are not fair -- that is, situations in which we feel we are not given our just desserts. We like to be on top, first in line, be recognized for our achievements. We like to get the accolades that we deserve when we work hard. We strive to get ahead, we "look out for number one," we complain when favors go to someone we think less deserving than ourselves. That may be why we never hear the complaint “It's not fair!” from the winners.

Jesus challenges our concept of fairness in this world and declares it irrelevant in the Kingdom of God. All throughout Matthew, Jesus gives us different images of the Kingdom, leading his followers to a more and more complete understanding. Each image is a little more complex than the one before. The Kingdom of God is like the perfect pearl. That's easy. It's like a little seed that grows unto a great bush. That's more complicated. It's about forgiveness to the max. The idea of forgiving 70 times 7—that's harder to understand and even harder to agree with. In today's parable about the employer and the day laborers, the Kingdom is about ignoring attention to normal transactional business and paying everybody equally no matter how much they worked. I suspect that some of his hearers went away shaking their heads in confusion, or walking away in disgust. It is a parable that offends our sense of fairness; many people would have a hard time justifying such bizarre labor practices. But the parable conveys a deep truth about God.

What Jesus is saying is that God does not play by our laws of economics. In fact, God makes a lousy bookkeeper—spreading wealth indiscriminately, giving Larry Latecomer the same exact paycheck as Esther Earlybird. (By the way, God could never

be elected to Congress either— all his bills would die in committee. (The last shall be first— indeed.) Jesus says that what is fair and what is just, is established by God and not by *our* standards of merit, qualifications, and standards. Life lived under the reign of God is a life ruled by a God who is generous to a fault, a God whose generosity offends us and baffles us. God's mercy and generosity towards human beings are simply beyond our calculations of what justice looks like, and beyond our wildest imaginings.

As long as we project onto God our earthly standards, we will continue to be confused, or even resentful, of God's heavenly standards. No, God is not fair. God is generous; God is lavish. God is a God of abundance. Look at the manna and the quails that God gave to the Israelites. After they complained, they got so much that it was coming out of their ears and then they complained that they were sick of it. This is God's economics, an economic not of fairness but of love. But think about how costly this economics of love has been for God. God's sacrificial love, our life forgiven and redeemed by Christ on the cross, turns our economics upside down and makes our cries for fairness cheap indeed.

We should be grateful that God does not transact heavenly business by our standards of worth, deserving, and pay. If we were rewarded according to our deserving, if we were business associates in a transaction with God to negotiate our entrance fee into heaven, all of us would be Larry Latecomer.

Instead, the kingdom is a place where we don't get what we deserve (thank God!), but rather what our loving and forgiving God wants so much to give us. God's infinite love and grace and mercy, all of it, is poured out on each of us and no matter how much *you* get, all of it is still available to *me*. And everybody gets the best seat in God's kingdom because we all get the place that is prepared especially for us.

And finally, what if, because Jesus commands us to love one another as he loves us, we were to work together to make a place on earth that reflects that place in heaven, where love and mercy are poured out on all and we try to give everybody that generosity that we have received from God? We have a God whose desire for goodness and mercy extends to us, even when we are confused, skeptical, half hearted, or even wicked. What if we were able to extend that same goodness and mercy to others who are, after all, just like us— confused, skeptical, half-hearted, or even wicked?

The good news is that God's forgiveness and love is so great that God can provide all that we need, no matter how late in the day it is— on the deathbed, in the jail cell, after repeated failures. God shows us the true measure of love, freely giving what we would hoard for ourselves. We need not work to earn it; we need not complain when it is given as freely to others as it is given to us. We simply need to receive it in order for it to do its life-sustaining work, and we are called to give it freely ourselves, just as God did and Christ commanded us to do. There certainly is enough for us and for the world.