

“A FAIR WAGE”

Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Sept. 24, 2017

Exodus 16:2-15 (NRSV) The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. {3} The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." {4} Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. {5} On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." {6} So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, {7} and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?" {8} And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him--what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD." {9} Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'" {10} And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. {11} The LORD spoke to Moses and said, {12} "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" {13} In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. {14} When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. {15} When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

Philippians 1:21-30 (NRSV) For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. {22} If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. {23} I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; {24} but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. {25} Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, {26} so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. {27} Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, {28} and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. {29} For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well-- {30} since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

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

Is it too cool in here? Too hot? How you feeling? Good. Not so good. Arthritis acting up. A little tired maybe. But it's Sunday and we're supposed to go to church. So the Jags are playing. We hope. We won't go there. Well, maybe later. So did you like that first hymn this morning? Who picks this stuff. You sure it's not too cold?

People have always, always found in them the need to complain. On the one hand, there's something fundamentally good about getting something off your chest, and most of the time what people complain about is justified. On the other hand, complaining sometimes sounds an awful lot like whining because things are just not as we want them to be. Complaining often comes before thinking things through.

As our children grow, right after they learn to say mommy or daddy the next sentence they learn to say, or at least to demonstrate is, "it's not fair." Hungry, uncomfortable, wet, angry – what's that cry about? That cry is saying in a crescendo of intensity the longer relief isn't offered, 'life's not fair.' When they are old enough, almost gleefully parents, who have lived their whole lives in the dastardly knowledge, tell the child whose half of the brownie isn't as big as their siblings, 'aw, sweetie, life's not fair.' And so it goes. We don't get what we want. Life's not fair. Your team doesn't win. Life's not fair. You or someone you love gets sick through no apparent fault of their own. Life's not fair. Life, at least as we understand it isn't fair.

Look at those people of God out there in the wilderness. Don't you think they have some justification in their complaint? They felt justified for sure. The wilderness

is no picnic, in fact if they wanted to have a picnic this land supposedly flowing with milk and honey didn't exactly have a seven eleven on every corner. Any corner for that matter. Does the wilderness even have corners? But, on the other hand, it seems they've forgotten, at least temporarily all that God had already done for them. Freeing them from bondage, guiding them across the sea, saving them from annihilation when the Egyptians were hot on their heels.

So sure, they start looking for somewhere to lodge their complaint which they know is God. Now they may be upset, but there's no evidence that they're crazy. So they do what is next best, they complain to Moses and Aaron, who let's face it in the scope of things are not much more than tour guides at this point. But they are the ones who have to report to the boss, so they are the ones who have to hear the whining. "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

So, they complain...and God, because God is a God of infinite patience and compassion, acts for them. And the manna and quail come. And until they get thirsty, which is next weeks story, all is well....for a while.

Just who is this God who provides? This God, who in the old testament at least, seems to maneuver everything? This God with a purpose and a plan that these people are surely a part of, but have a hard time seeing?

Sometimes we wonder who God is, and where God is, and would like

nothing better than a God who gives us manna to eat and tells us each step to take. But, sometimes we like to say, "God's not fair." But our complex God, God is for us, more complex. But we do have Jesus. And Jesus knows God. And if we listen to him, he will allow us to know God.

Jesus wants us to know God. He wants us to know how God wants us to live. But mostly it seems by what he says and by what he does, he wants us to know how much God loves us. So he teaches and preaches and tells us stories that allow us to know God. To be aware of God's presence. To be fed in real and spiritual ways by God.

Jesus uses parables to challenge the way we look at things -- at our ideas of who is God is. At our idea of God's fairness. He wants us to know that we can't paint God into a corner, or put God in a box, or use God for own devices. So he tells us about God by letting us know that God doesn't play by our rules. God does the unexpected. God won't settle for a little forgiveness, but expects an infinite capacity to forgive. God lavishes forgiveness on us, freeing us from a depth of debt we can never repay. And when it comes to God's grace, everyone gets a fair amount.

So today we are confronted by another story. And when we read it, our nature, which is surely not God's nature tells us, "There is something really wrong with this story!" Here is a land owner that goes out to the employment office and hires some day labor. He started early in the morning and hired a crew, then had

to go back at nine o'clock. He has to go back three more times to get workers. The last bunch is hired at five o'clock in the afternoon (just about our quitting time).

When we get to the end of the story, Jesus turns the thing on its head. The land owner pays everyone the same. Now if we are honest and we are sitting in church so it's a good idea to be honest, this is the kind of stuff that would send us straight to the complaint department. We're just not sure how this is --- fair.

Imagine if you were a Pharisee hearing this story while Jesus is telling it. It just isn't right. It's not how things are supposed to work. What kind of way is this to do business?

Jesus knows it will make us squirm. Obviously, the land owner is representing God. And this parable shakes our idea of what God is like. God just doesn't act like we expect God to act. There are questions of justice here. God certainly doesn't act the way *we* would act. But then, do we really want a God that acts the way we would act?

In the parable when the inevitable protest comes from those who have been in their minds wronged we hear God say, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Once again, Jesus is trying to show God to us. God's economy is not like

ours. We hoard and stockpile; we measure out the day's pay according to hours worked, according to the value we, society, place on what one does. And ours is not, in the least, an equitable system. On a hot, hot day at a ball game the vendor in the aisles selling icy cold beverages may give a person, even for an exorbitant ball park price, something that for a few minutes at least will provide much more relief and enjoyment than the ridiculously paid athletes on the field of play who make as much as the entire population in many developing nations, stumble and fumble and make us spew all sorts of ungodly diatribes, while our friendly vendor toils under the same sun for an hourly wage. Pardon my complaining but our economy is messed up. Any two of the teachers that helped to educate our quarterback will make less in a year than what our quarterback makes for each touchdown pass he will throw – or since we're complaining each interception.

God, however, simply assures that there is enough for everyone. Enough manna--but no more. A day's wages--no less.

Our ideas are not God's ideas. God is a God of daily bread we are people who believe in fighting for what is ours and when we think we are being short changed, when we are being wronged, we are going to complain. But, what this parable, what Jesus is trying to tell us is that God is not like us. We complain in the wilderness – God provides. We insist that the world isn't fair and wonder why God doesn't do something about it. But what we see as fair is always in our favor. God provides a fair amount of Grace for all. For God the first will be last and the

last will be first.

In God's economy there is enough. In our world, which is God's, there is enough. We must learn to do not as we do, but as God does, and when all is said and done, when we have served good and well, we need to graciously accept our reward and not begrudge those others who receive the same reward with less or no work. It is called grace. And in God's grace we have no basis for complaint.

"The Grumble Family"

There's a family nobody likes to meet,
They live, it is said, on Complaining Street,
In the city of Never-are-Satisfied,
The river of Discontent beside.
They growl at that and they growl at this,
Whatever comes there is something amiss;
And whether their station be high or humble,
They all are known by the name of Grumble.
The weather is always too hot or cold,
Summer and winter alike they scold;
Nothing goes right with the folks you meet
Down on that gloomy Complaining Street.
They growl at the rain and they growl at the sun,
In fact their growling is never done.

And if everything pleased them, there isn't a doubt
They'd growl that they'd nothing to grumble about.
But the queerest thing is that not one of the same
Can be brought to acknowledge his family name
For never a Grumbler will own that he
Is connected with it at all, you see.
And the worst thing is that if anyone stays
Amongst them too long he will learn their ways,
And before he dreams of the terrible jumble
He's adopted into the family of Grumble.
So it were wisest to keep our feet
From wandering into Complaining Street;
And never to growl, whatever we do,
Lest we be mistaken for Grumblers too,
Let us learn to walk with a smile and song,
No matter if things do sometimes go wrong,
And then, be our station high or humble,
We'll *never* belong to the family of Grumble!—