

God Is Not Fair

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Preaching on:
Matthew 20:1–16

Man, this is hard. This is hard. But I don't know how to preach this sermon this morning without telling you this. So, I'm just gonna rip the Band-Aid off right at the beginning. Here goes: Freshman year of college I got an F—it gets worse—I got an F in my Intro to Photography class! Not easy to admit! I had never failed a class before. I was an A student. I was on the National Honor Roll. But I got an F from Boston University's College of Communication, School of Journalism—JO305 (I'll never forget it!) BASIC PHOTO. An F! Oi.

In my defense, kids, this was way before the days of digital photography. Everything was on this stuff called film, and I was good at taking pictures but really bad at developing film—you're in this dark room and it smells weird and you've got to mix all these chemicals together and put the pictures in just long

enough but not too long, and there's sort of an intuition to it. It's like cooking, and I was burning the salad every time. I just didn't have it.

Also, my transition to college was tough. I started struggling with depression and anxiety second semester, and I had no idea that was even a thing you could get help for, so I just kind of pulled the covers over my head when it came to this photo class because it was stressing me out. Don't do what I did, ask someone for help.

Anyway, because I failed this class, my GPA dropped, and I lost my merit-based scholarship. Which meant that, to send me back to school for sophomore year, it was going to cost my parents thousands of more dollars than they thought it was going to cost them when they sent me to school based on a fairly simple agreement: You're gonna work hard, you're gonna do your best, you're keep your grades up, you're going to maintain your scholarship, you'll work part-time for spending money, and we're gonna bankroll the rest (which was still the vast majority of the cost and a lot of money.)

My dad felt that I had not lived up to my end of the bargain. He was right. I hadn't. He thought the fair and right thing to do was to pull me out of school, let me get a full-time job and start earning my own money, and figure out my way through college. He was annoyed and disappointed with me, sure. But this wasn't a punishment. He really felt that holding me accountable, letting me suffer the consequences of my own failures, and making me responsible for my own path forward was the best thing for me. When my dad graduated from high school there was no money to send him to college. So, my dad went to Vietnam. And he made his own through war and life after that. So, there was nothing unfair about what he was offering me here, right? It was still a way better deal than anything he ever got.

But my mom wouldn't let him do it. She wasn't soft or anything. That wasn't it. She wasn't anything goes. But my mom, who got pregnant out of wedlock while she was in college, and who was put into a Catholic home for embarrassed young ladies, and lost the support of her family, and who was forced to give her child up for adoption by a system that never really gave her any choice, understood in her bones that when someone is drowning—first, throw them a line. First, save their life, then from there hold them accountable. It's not that my mom didn't want to hold me accountable. That wasn't it. It wasn't even a calculation; it was just a decision. In the end, my parents decided to put my need ahead of their fairness.

What's incredible to me is that despite this fact—despite the fact that I have been and am in need of mercy (in so many ways! Not just this one!) despite this fact that I am in need of mercy, whenever I read our scripture reading from this morning, I immediately identify with the complainers who are saying, NO FAIR! No fair! We've been working all day in the sun, and these Johnny-come-latelies, who showed up just a few hours ago are getting the full day's wage just like us. NO FAIR. I hear their complaint and I feel it, I understand it. They're right. That's not fair. And I bristle and I worry and I get

upset on their behalf.

I've received mercy in my life. Why don't I identify with the workers who are given the extra money? Why don't I feel their joy? I'm not rich, but I have resources. And I could use the money I do have to benefit people who need it. So, why don't identify with the vineyard owner who has no obligation to be generous, but does it anyway? There's just something about being human. We're obsessed with fairness because we're made sick by the idea that someone else may get something that we didn't get—someone else may get ahead of us in line, get a handout they don't deserve.

But let's not go too far here. I mean, fairness is very important. Civilization, in part, depends on there being some sense of law and order and fairness. If we're going to come together and freely form a society, then we have to trust that there will be some means of enforcing fairness. And civilizations are rocked by unrest and protest and civil war when trust in our institutions and in our neighbors fails, right?

Not everyone agrees on what fairness looks like, right? But no one ever argues before the Supreme Court, for example, in favor of unfairness, right? Both sides of whatever the issue is will make the case for fairness. We saw this in the Affirmative Action in college admissions case. Both sides made arguments appealing to fairness.

And so we might think that fairness is a more-than human desire, right? Selfishness is the human desire. So, fairness must be divine. It must be God who inspires us to fight for fairness. And certainly that's true to an extent. But for those of us who cling to fairness like an immovable rock, Jesus has an unwelcome message for us: God is not fair. God is not fair.

I think Jesus understands that there is virtue in the human longing for fairness. No doubt about it. I have no doubt, for example, that the civil rights movement of the 1950 and 60s was inspired by God and watched over by heaven. God cares about justice in human affairs. But God is not fair.

The reason that fairness is not a divine attribute is because fairness, despite all its virtue, has a shadow side. The light side of fairness is exactly what we all know it is—equal treatment, equal opportunity, nobody taking advantage of anyone else, no one getting ahead by cheating, fair and square right across the board. But there's a dark side to this kind of thinking too. A fair world can be a world of terrible consequences for even small mistakes. It can be a world that doesn't offer second chances. It can be a bloody, violent world with little to no mercy. A society that was truly puritanical about fairness would be a mean, hard, cold world—a world without mercy and a world without comfort for all those who had ever fallen off the wagon of perfection.

Being human means being kinda messed up. It's hard. It's painful. There's a lot that can go wrong. Fairness just says, Tough. That's not my problem. You made your bed and now you're gonna have to

sleep in it. Is it fair to have to feed the hungry? I put food on my table. Is it fair to have to heal the sick? I take care of my health. I maintain my health insurance. Is it fair to have to visit prisoners? I haven't done any of those terrible things.

But, beloved, our God isn't fair. Our God is more than fair. And sometimes when God is more than fair to someone else, it can feel like God is being unfair to me. And when that happens, it's a good time to engage in the spiritual practice of being thankful for God's mercy. It's a good time to remember—because it really was hard to tell you I failed my photo class 26 years ago! I really would rather forget about that—so, it's a good time to remember the mistakes we have all made and the mercies we have all received. We bury those memories. We like to forget that stuff in preference for the story of how we deserve everything we've got. No doubt you've worked hard. No doubt you've made good decisions. And no doubt you've received mercy and been forgiven and been given second chances and been helped out from time to time.

I stayed in school. And I took responsibility for myself. I talked to a therapist about my depression, I earned straight As the following year, I reapplied to and won my scholarship back, and to my mother's never-ending delight and pride I graduated Magna Cum Laude. That propelled me on to seminary, which led me right here, standing before you this morning. Is it fair? Nope. It's not. Thank you, God, that you are more than fair. And thank you, God for this vision!

I see it! At the end of time after the last trumpet has blown! The whole human race is lined up before the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven. The gates open, and Jesus emerges with a serious expression on his face. He looks at the line, billions and billions of people long. And he starts walking—slowly, intentionally—looking each and every one of us in the eye. He walks past saints. He walks past popes. He walks past presidents, and activists, and humanitarians. He walks past Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He walks past Rosa Parks. He walks past every historic name and every famous face, every contributor to human goodness and flourishing. He walks past me and he walks past you. And he looks each of us in the eye, until we look away.

Until he comes to the end of the line—to the souls who just barely made it all: the last, the least, and the lost. And he walks until he comes to that very last soul in line—some wretched old fool who made every mistake and made it twice. And he's such a fool, he doesn't even know to bow his head when Jesus stands beside him. He just looks up without any pretense, without any posturing; he just stands there, the last of us all, staring into the eyes of judgment. And Jesus' stern face finally breaks into a smile, his eyes crinkling with joy. And he reaches out and takes that fool by the hand and he says, "I'm so glad you made it." And may it be so for all of us. Amen.