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Matthew 20:1-16
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What is fairness anyway?

So I was in the car getting a ride to a church conference. And the person who was driving me started talking about politics. An uncomfortable situation to say the least. But what stuck with me was how he complained that the government was so worried about helping poor black people, while not giving enough to poor whites. It just was not fair since all people should be treated equally.

I tell that story to stir you up and make you feel uncomfortable. First, because I'm pretty sure that unsettling people is somewhere in a pastor's job description. Second, because this parable made me feel uncomfortable reading it.

What is fairness?

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner (probably God) who is looking for laborers. At the end of the day of work, the workers grumble that workers who worked only an hour got paid the same as those who "bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat." And yes, they are right. The landowner is not being fair in insisting on equality. In fact, it is the opposite of what should be done. Jesus's parable is turning the world upside down, making the last first and the first last.

What is fairness?

Is fairness that everyone gets what they deserve? If that is fairness, it is not God's fairness. I am reminded of the parable of the prodigal son, when the prodigal returns, the older brother who stayed loyal to his father complains that he never got any parties thrown for him. This is also what Jonah argues about, God is far too merciful to the horrible city of Nineveh, which deserved to be destroyed for the how they were the mortal enemies of God's people.

No. God is not fair. God is overflowing with a wasteful love that spreads out to the people who do not deserve it.

God is more concerned about healing people. Celebrating the repentance of Nineveh and paying the laborers the wage they needed to survive regardless of how much they worked that day. In fact, I think the point was generosity, rather than fairness. Like God is looking for any excuse to bless people. God is continually returning to the marketplace looking for more laborers, not because there is more work to do, but because there are hungry people who need the work.

And perhaps that is the lesson we can learn about the kingdom of heaven. To focus on mercy and generosity, rather than what people deserve. To focus on what people need to survive, rather than why they were standing idle all day. Today's parable is radical, it makes us uncomfortable. Good. God is turning the world around, So the last will be first, and the first will be last. Amen.