

Alice S. Nichols
September 21, 2014
Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY
Pentecost 15/Proper 20/Year A/Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45, Philippians
1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16.

“Not Fair!”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

One of the most important people in my life when I was growing up was my bachelor uncle, Charles—my dad’s younger brother. He lived next door to us with my grandparents. One of the first things he asked me when I started on the path toward ordination was, “Will do preach at my funeral?” After that, it seemed like every time I was with him and he had the opportunity to introduce me to anyone, he would say, “This is my niece—Alice—the one who’s going to preach at my funeral.” We had a special bond.

Five years ago, when my Uncle Charles died, I talked a bit with various family members about their memories of Charles so that I could incorporate a few of those memories in the funeral homily. Charles was a man who always wanted to be giving something to everyone he knew. He was a postal worker for years and would always carry bubble gum along his delivery route to give to the children he would run into along the way. (He would tell them that he was paying them to watch his truck while he was going from house to house delivering the mail.) When I was talking with one of my cousins, she laughingly told me about a memory of what Charles gave her for Christmas one year, and how she realized later that he had given the same thing to another child who was not a family member. My cousin remembers, 50 years later, that feeling that she had not quite been treated fairly because she had gotten the same gift as a non-family member.

Early in life, we pick up on the notion of “fairness.” There are times in our lives in which “fairness” becomes all-consuming. Children of a certain age will watch carefully for any infraction of the “rules of fairness” and frequently interject or wail out loudly, “That’s not fair!” even when fairness may not be an issue at all! Smart parents with more than one child work hard to make everything fair and equal and even between or among the children. And, preoccupation with fairness doesn’t always stop with childhood. Families of adults often split apart over the settling of wills or estates. “It’s not fair that sister Jane got the family silver, or all of dear mother’s jewelry.” Some families work out elaborate systems of “divvying” everything up so that no one feels cheated or treated unfairly.

In today’s gospel, Jesus is telling a parable of the kingdom of God that clearly raises the fairness issue. The wealthy landowner is anxious to get his crop of grapes harvested. Various people read the story in different ways. Some think that all of the workers are there early in the morning and that the landowner carefully picks a certain number every few hours. Others view a different scenario. The way I’ve seen it is that the landowner may be taking all that are available each time he goes looking—that perhaps he is really anxious for the job to be completed so he keeps going back to see if more workers have arrived. He wants and needs all the help he can get.

All is well until it comes time for payment. We might wonder if the landowner realizes that he can simply avoid the problem altogether by paying the first workers first and sending them on down the road and out of the way. Maybe they will never know that everyone gets the same pay. That’s what some employers try to do these days. There’s often a clause in the hiring contract which says something like, “I agree not to discuss the amount of my pay with

other employees.” That can be a real flag-raiser. “Wonder what Joe over there makes? I’m probably being cheated. I’m probably being a chump to be working for what I am.”

But, Jesus is wanting to make his point, and so, in the story, he has the landowner hand out the first pay to the last workers hired. Everyone knows that all are getting the same pay. And the editor adds in a closing line of interpretation, “So the last will be first, and first will be last.” And maybe he is right about that being the point. We have a pattern going in this section of Matthew. Just prior to this particular passage, we have Jesus talking with his disciples about giving up everything in order to inherit eternal life. And, just after this passage, we have Jesus explaining to them that the greatest will be the servant and the first will be the slave. But the point here seems a bit different to me—less about who is first or last, and more about all being the same in the eyes of a generous God.

The crux of the parable is that the kingdom of God operates on an economy that is entirely different from the economy of the world. Some call it a Sabbath economy. This is an economy which is based on need and not on merit or earning or deserving. All the workers need to make enough to cover their necessities—and probably the necessities of their families — for the day, and the landowner knows that. It is an economy of generosity. Jesus says it clearly in three words from the landowners’ mouth—“I am generous.” Generosity is a higher value than fairness in the kingdom of God.

It is sometimes difficult for us to believe and remember that God is generous. In our reading from Exodus we have the wonderful story of the Israelites longing for the “good old days” of slavery in Egypt, when they at least had enough to eat, and complaining to Moses and Aaron about the lack of food in the wilderness—even questioning whether they have been

brought there to be starved to death. God graciously intervenes and provides generously for them. But God also says, “You’re going to have to trust my generosity. Every day you’re going to have to trust me. I’m not going to let you hoard or let you think that you can provide for yourself. If you do that, what I give you will rot. It will be worthless to you. You have to be continually receiving.” That’s a powerful metaphor. If we don’t trust in the generosity of God, what we acquire and try to hold onto for ourselves will rot. It will make us sick.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus is always creating a vision of plenty. Every gospel contains the story of thousands being fed with a small quantity of bread and fish. Jesus is concerned that everyone has enough—that all are invited to the feast or the banquet—that invitation and inclusion have nothing to do with merit or status.

It’s often hard to trust in God’s generosity, especially when it comes to material means or material needs. So much can be taken away in what seems like a twinkling of the eye—financial crises, natural disasters, sudden personal losses—the Ebola epidemic sweeping western Africa and spreading financial devastation as well. Trusting sounds like foolishness.

A well-known Episcopal preacher (Claypool) retells “an old rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and he taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm, and, when the father died, they had found that their working together was so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. So each brother contributed what he could, and, during every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had corporately produced. Across the years the elder brother never married, stayed an old bachelor. The younger brother did marry and had eight

wonderful children. Some years later when they were having a (plentiful) harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, ‘My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of his harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I’ll do. In the dead of the night when he is already asleep, I’ll take some of what I have put in my barn and I’ll slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children.

“At the very time he was thinking down that line, the younger brother was thinking to himself, ‘God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn’t been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He’s much too fair. He’ll never renegotiate. I know what I’ll do. In the dead of the night when he’s asleep, I’ll take some of what I’ve put in my barn and slip it over into his barn.’ And so one night when the moon was full, as you may have already anticipated, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. The old rabbi said that there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, but a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God weeping for joy because two of his children had gotten the point. Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy and because we are made in God’s image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well.” (John Claypool, “Life Isn’t Fair, Thank God,” Jan. 30, 2000)

Our God is a generous giver, welcoming all of us to the table whether we deserve to be there or not—whether we have earned the right to be there or not, and generosity is even better than fairness. God is always giving and giving and giving—showering us with grace, mercy, and love—so much that we can’t take it in without giving it away and becoming more God-

like. The only limitation on God's giving is our capacity and our willingness to receive and our capacity and willingness to be bearers of God's generosity in our own lives. Amen.