

“Field of Dreams” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey 9/28/08
Noe Valley Ministry, a Presbyterian Church

TEXT: Matthew 20:1-16 ‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 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?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” 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.” When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.” 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? 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?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

LIFE IS NOT FAIR. You have heard the stories: a state employee arrives early every morning, answering the telephone until her tardy coworkers appear. She skips lunch in order to catch up on the filing and stays late to file our reports for her supervisor, who has learned that she is the only one in the department who knows what is going on. When annual raises are due, he calls her into his office and explains that while she has done a superlative job, there will be no merit increases this year. Salaries will be increased across the board, with everyone receiving the same amount, because he thinks that will do more for group morale.

Or a man cares for his elderly mother taking her into his own home when she becomes too frail to live by herself; although he has 3 brothers and sisters, he rarely hears from them. They call from time to time to tell him how grateful they are, but none of them offers to help. “They have problems of their own” his mother tells him, patting his hand. “I just thank God for you.” Then she dies and suddenly the whole family appears, grieving as if they had been there all along. And the man, who has spent most of his savings on his mother, listens to the lawyer read the will “I leave my estate to be divided equally among my four dear children because I love them all the same.” It is just not fair.

It wasn’t fair as a child when your brother got to eat before dinner and you didn’t, when your sister started the fight but you got blamed, when everyone in your class could go on the field trip but you couldn’t, when your friends had cars of their own but you didn’t.

And it certainly isn’t fair that that the CEO’s of giant corporations earn 20, 40, 50 million dollars a year, while laying off lower paid employees. It isn’t fair that “mom and pop” investors have lost their savings, because they risked getting a better return on the stock market than they could in a bank. It isn’t fair that people are losing their homes because the banks encouraged them to over-extend in mortgages.

Life is not fair. Perhaps that is why it seems all that much more important that God should be. God should be the one authority whom you can count on to reward people according to their efforts, who keeps track of how long you have worked and how hard you have worked, who does not let people break into line in front of you. Life may not be fair, but God should be!

Then comes this story of a landowner who goes out to hire workers for his field. It starts out with infinite fairness, as he promises a day's wages for a day's work. It ends up in bitter outrage and argument, for he has hired more workers at intervals throughout the day, and at sundown, he pays them each a full denarius whether they worked one hour or 12 hours.

There is nothing fair about that at all! Rewarding those who work is fair. Rewarding those who do not work is not fair. Treating everyone the same is fair; treating everyone the same when they are NOT the same is not fair. "They worked only one hour and you made them equal to us," cries an early bird, now sunburned and exhausted and sore from his long hours. "Not fair!"

But the landowner reminds them that he has kept his part of the bargain, that he has paid them exactly what they agreed to be paid, and what business was it of theirs what he pays the others? "Cannot I do what I choose with what belongs to me?" he asks.

The manager just feels like being generous. Those are his grounds. He can do whatever he wants to do in his own vineyard. And what he wants is to let the last be first. Everyone will be paid. No one will go home empty-handed. All are welcome, all are cared for.

So why is it we begrudge the late workers their generous wages? Is it because we are so afraid there won't be enough to go around? Is it because we have a bottomless need for reassurances, for strokes that assure us we are special and good and appreciated? Is it because we are so oppressed by our egos and fears, that we can't be generous ourselves? Fairness is a concept that has to do with limits – But apparently God has another idea.

It seems that God wants everyone to have enough. Are we afraid to trust that there is enough for all? Do we need more than enough to feel secure? The Spanish word for enough is *bastante*. *Bastante* means "enough," it means "plenty." If you have enough, you have plenty. What a concept! Enough means that if you share, there is still enough for everyone! Enough for everyone to stay alive and keep moving toward home and wholeness. The parable reminds us that Jesus wasn't interested in fair, he wanted to make sure that everyone knew they would receive exactly what they needed: *Bastante* enough, plenty, the full measure of grace no matter who they were or how long they had known him.

Why do you suppose that we always see ourselves as the ones who have gotten up early and worked hard and stayed late? Why are we the ones who have been cheated, who have gotten the short end of the stick? This story sounds quite different from the end of the line, after all, than it does from the front of the line, but isn't it interesting that 99 percent of us hear it from front row seats?

It is entirely possible that we are mistaken about where we are in the line-up?

This story reminds me of my own growing up: Saturday afternoons when the local movie house showed kids' films and cartoons. Parents would drop us off there in the heat of a summer afternoon (doubtless giddy at the prospect of a couple hours' peace and quiet). We would stand with our dollar bills burning holes in our pockets as we debated the economics of popcorn versus Junior Mints.

Our friends would arrive and we would shout their names, motioning them over to claim the places we had saved for them. The children behind us would complain bitterly and so would we when the same thing happened in front of us.

Where everyone wanted to be was right up there at the front of the line. That was the best place to be, because you were there when the doors were unlocked, when the timid-looking manager pushed them open, when a great wave of cold air rolled out of the dark theater with an icy promise of everything that waited for you inside. That was the moment you got to rush in for the best seats, on the front row of the second section!

I cannot imagine anything more disheartening than if the manager had come outside and reversed the order, telling those of us at the front of the line to stay put while he invited those at the end of the line, those who had just arrived, those who were not even hot yet from standing in the sun, to enter the theater first. I think I would have cried; I certainly would have booed because it would not have been fair. Those of us at the front of the line had earned our reward. We knew it and so did everyone else. On what grounds would anyone dare to reverse the order?

One Saturday, I found myself at the end of the line, held up through no fault of my own, craning my neck for even a glimpse of the theater, looking for some friends, afraid that I might not get in at all. I was suddenly dreading a long, hot afternoon while everyone else was laughing and eating popcorn inside the cool dark theater. I didn't know why other kids were at the end of that line – Maybe they had to ride a bus or care for a sick sister or finish chores or complete a paper route. All I knew was, my Mom had been late that day, it wasn't my fault and it just wasn't fair.

Now I try to imagine what it might have felt like if, all of a sudden a stir went through the crowd. The manager appeared out of nowhere and walked right up to me with a stack of blue tickets in his hands, saying "we are starting at the end today." And everyone, at least at the back of the line, began to cheer.

The truth is, God is not fair. God is not fair, but depending on where you are in line, that can sound like powerful good news, because if God is not fair then there is a chance we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will not be left out even though we have not been chosen or we are the last in line...not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

God is not fair; God is generous, and when we begrudge that generosity, perhaps it is only because we have forgotten where we stand in the line-up.

Like those early workers, our human tendency will always be to murmur and complain and whine. Our fear causes us to turn on each other and on our leaders. How would you have liked to have been in Congress this week or the head of some financial institution on Wall Street? I am just as quick as the next person to condemn these leaders for their greed and exploitive behavior, and I think the judgment is valid. I can claim victim and cite immoral fraud with the best of them.

But there is part of me that is discovering that all of us in America have contributed to this financial crisis by depending too much on credit, living way beyond

our means because the Visa card has been so easy to use, feeling entitled to cut corners and cheat and lie strategically, letting banks offer us something we know is unrealistic... I actually know someone who was turned down for a car loan, because the salesman could not make the numbers work; but he had a home loan a month later. He never questioned it. What if we are all to blame? What if it is not as simple as saying “we deserve this” or “we don’t deserve that?”

Earlier we heard the story of the Hebrew people complaining in the wilderness. They had forgotten that God had just brought them through the Red Sea in a bold act of salvation and liberation. Their fear and discomfort drove them to complain and to blame. But God, ever looking to offer life and abundance, provided for them. Manna became God’s gift, God’s promise – the very grace we’ve been talking about. When we face the wilderness, we learn to rely on God for bread in the morning and meat at twilight. We gather it every day. It may not look like anything we expected. It may not even vaguely resemble what we wanted. We might not recognize that it is what we need. But even when we ask, “What is it?” there is holy manna on the ground.

In our wilderness, God is with us. In our wilderness, God is still God. In our wilderness, God provides. In the wilderness of a down-sizing, God is with us -- Manna may come in the form of new career horizons, new dreams for our future, new opportunities to be with family or friends. In the wilderness of a home in which bread crumbs are what’s for dinner, Manna may come with the face of Christian community bearing casseroles. Manna might mean other adults who offer love and guidance and care. Manna might be time to discover a garden or a dream. In the wilderness of a hurricane, Manna may rain down in an outpouring of generous hearts and open arms, Manna that looks like clean clothes, hot food, and a place to stay.

God doesn’t want our lives to be wildernesses or to be fields of hard labor. God always offers us a field of dreams. But the entry price is high. You must be willing to want the next person to work less and make more. You must want to work for the sake of working. You must give up the word *entitlement* and embrace the words *grace*, *generosity*, *trust*.

We can only accept grace, for ourselves and others, and give grace, when we trust God. In the same way as the Manna appeared for the Israelites, God sometimes lets our blessings trickle to us drop by drop, instead of pouring them in a flood all at once upon us, allowing us to taste the peace and strength of continuous dependence and the joy of continuous receiving.

God’s vineyard is truly a field of dreams, God’s dreams. May they be our dreams as well. Amen.