

# “A Fair Wage” (No Fair: 3 of 3)

a sermon based on  
Matthew 20:1-16

and delivered on-  
September 20, 2020

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

at  
Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

Copyright © 2020 Rev. Mark A Harkness

Today, we're wrapping up this sermon series: *No Fair*. In the first two weeks of this series, *fairness* related to forgiveness. Each week we've considered our response to being wronged. First, we considered Jesus' injunction to go directly to the person who wronged us (rather than getting everybody on our side with our side of the story first so that everybody can be in a snit) with the express purpose of winning that one back – that is restoring the relationship, because it's not just *How to Fight Like a Christian* but that we fight for – what we strive for – which is reconciliation with rather than victory over. Last week, it was the *Math of Forgiveness*, in which we pondered our need to forgive continually so that we are not burdened by toting around the wrongs that have been done to us, even though one sin against me ends up equaling zero offense, an uneven and unfair score.

Today, we turn to a *Fair Wage*. I'll admit there's a temptation treat this passage from Matthew as if it's about money; but it's not. Jesus begins, "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." Right? He's making up a story on the spot using everyday experience and expectations to reveal to the crowd (and to us) how things work in heaven which we've not yet experienced.

So, he tells this story. There was a landowner who needed workers for the day. So he headed down to where men (it would have been men.) gathered to find work. Nowadays it would be the parking lot at Home Depot. That was the way things worked back then. Even today, most agricultural workers don't get to work as a farmhand with benefits for the same employer year round. The work is temporary and seasonal. It makes sense for the landowners in this story and for the workers, rather than each worker going from property to property asking if the owner needed labor and the owner having to hope that either enough showed up or getting overwhelmed with people knocking on his door. This system worked. Workers knew when to be at the gathering spot, landowners knew that they could make one trip and get the five, ten, fifteen (or however many they thought it would be) workers for the day. Right? It was and – in some cases – still is an efficient system.

In that day there was a standard daily wage. It was enough to pay for a little bit more than what one would need for the day, flour for bread, maybe some other items from the market: a tool or a piece of cloth – with enough left over so that after six days of work he'd have enough to buy food for his family in anticipation of the Sabbath day when he wouldn't work.

No one was getting rich doing this. In fact, if you didn't have any land (likely "earned" through inheritance) you probably weren't going to get rich. It still sort of works like that today. There are a few exceptions, but a better chance of success if your folks had enough money to buy a house in a prosperous school district and to pay for all the extra activities that would help you get scholarships, you start with a leg up. It's just a fact. But let's turn back to the story in the Bible.

So this owner starts by taking the number of workers that he thinks he can use for the day and which will get the work done. Obviously not everyone got chosen. Maybe he decided to go on the low end so that other farmers could have the labor they needed. Maybe he just calculated wrong. Of course, we know the end of the story, so maybe he calculated just right. We don't know and it doesn't matter.

What we do know is that he agreed to pay the usual daily wage and each of the workers agreed that that was fair and came to work in the field.

Around break time, the landowner strolls down to day labor pool and sees that there are men standing around. He'd probably seen some of them earlier. "Why are you, here?" he asks.

Maybe he's wondering if another farmer fired them for being lazy. Right? We have to think about this as if we don't know the end, if we want to grasp what it sounded like to the crowd listening to Jesus.

"No one has hired us," they reply. "I could use a little more help than I anticipated this morning," he says to himself, and hires some more men still leaving some behind. Why not all of them? Who knows. Maybe he thinks this will be an adequate labor force for his needs. Maybe, he wants to make sure that other landowners in the same situation can get the help that they need.

He does the same thing at lunch time and then again at the afternoon break. Finally, at the end of the day – "about five o'clock" (v.6) Scripture says, he goes back to the marketplace and sees guys still standing around. "Why have you been idle all day?" (v. 6) Question could be heard as, "What's up with you lazy bunch?" Right? How do they answer? "No one has hired us." Basically, they're saying "We want to work. Why else would we still be standing here? If we were lazy we'd be down by the fishing hole or lounging at home." Think about that?

It's sort of like those who collect unemployment or even Social Security. We all know that in order to be eligible for unemployment insurance someone had to have been working and is looking for work. Right? You can't get unemployment if you hadn't been working. You can't get unemployment if you get fired for cause. I know. In my previous career, I went to several unemployment hearings for people who were appealing because I'd fired them. Only one time (for a woman that had a bad moment, but was a good and reliable employee) did we lose the appeal. Probably because most of the times I had to fire an employee it was for absenteeism – not showing up for work. Why would we begrudge someone who wants to work and has worked from getting a little bit of help – about 40% of what had just barely been helping them along – for a short time while they look for work? Why would we begrudge someone for collecting Social Security? You have to have worked to get Social Security (maybe collecting on a spouse because your work was at home.). But work is a requirement. Right? In fact, when I hear about suggestions by people who make their money just by having money that we need to cut Social Security, I dumbfounded, because the only people who actually work for a living pay the Social Security tax either directly or by the lower wage their employer pays to meet its portion. But that is another topic.

Here, though, are men who want to work. They want to provide for their family. At the end of the day, they're willing to work for even an hour. Maybe they won't earn enough to feed the whole family. Maybe he'll have to forgo his meal so that the children get theirs. Maybe it will be just enough so that his wife can eat enough to make milk for the baby. They're hanging out for hope.

The guys chosen at nine o'clock, noon and three o'clock, have probably done similar math. They're working hard so that maybe the landowner will pick them first tomorrow and they can actually have enough for themselves then.

At the end of the day, when the landowner tells his steward to do payroll working from the latest hire to the first hire, the guys who were hoping just to show that they were hard workers were elated to receive a day's pay. They could go home to their wives and children knowing that

no one would be hungry, that they'd have wood for a fire to keep them warm, and that they could sleep peacefully without the worry of what might happen tomorrow. Think of the blessing.

The people who heard this would have been impressed, by the landowner's generosity. A generous man is certainly fair. Right?

So when the workers who got hired at three o'clock come and receive a full days wage, they're not entirely surprised. Maybe a little thinking that the landowner would have given them a bit more than the previous group. Then again, they only worked three hours.

Same thing with the guys who came at noon. But really, they worked a lot longer. So it goes, until the guys who started working at six in the morning – daybreak to sundown – come for their pay. They've seen what the landowner has paid. They recognize that he's generous and start to do the math. "Certainly he will reward us with more." But, he doesn't. They get the exact amount that they were promised and agreed to.

They get mad. The crowd hearing the story understands. We understand. It's not fair. But what's not fair? They don't say, "It's not fair that you paid us exactly what you promised and we agreed to." They don't even say, "It's not fair that you were generous with those who worked only a portion of the day." What they say is, "It's not fair that you have made them equal to us." It's not fair, that there's an upper limit to my Social Security even though, I was able to get a legacy admission to an ivy league university where I could make enough connections so that I earned enough that I could build up a 401-K and stock portfolio.

It's not that I think people shouldn't have what they need. We just need to be sure that we're not equal... Huh? Last week, wouldn't the way to be fair be to make sure everyone had equal pain? But equal blessing? That's a problem?

When Jesus said, "the kingdom of heaven is like...", he was alluding to God's nature. That's pretty obvious. The people to whom he was talking knew that they had been chosen. But...

Had they forgotten (or maybe ignored) that the Lord told Abraham that "by your offspring shall **all the nations of the earth** gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." (Ge 22:18)

But we were first. Shouldn't our blessing be better? Sometimes this shows up in local congregations. "My family were original members of this church. Only we get to make decisions." Or as Rev. Young-Mee Park said in a sermon at a DeKalb District leadership training several years ago, "We all want more young people and families in our churches, right?" Heads nodded. Until she went on, "As long as they act like old people."

While I was in college – and even after I graduated – I worked as a landscaper. When we were building retaining walls most of the time and hard labor was spent on the work below ground, getting the foundation right and getting those first couple of levels down and even. After that, the work was easy. So the best workers, we'd do all of that hard work, leaving the easier tasks to the less skilled workers. But at the end of the day, when as a crew leader I'd be doing some paper work – at the end of the day when the homeowner came home and saw what had been done and the workers who were doing the simple finishing work – the compliment seemed to go to the ones who did the easy part. That sort of stunk.

Then again. My hard work on the foundation, helped others to shine.

As Christians, let us not ever begrudge someone else's good fortune, even if it's only because of our own hard work. Instead, we can rejoice with them because they are built up. In fact, if we strive for others to receive a fair wage and to have a full place in the church and the kingdom of God, we can boast not in ourselves, but in them.

That's what Jesus did. The boast of his resurrection from the tomb after dying on the cross wasn't an example of how right he was for heaven, but so that each of us could stand on his shoulders – that each of us could claim the deed that he did, for our own glory. That's the fairness God offers. AMEN.