

Sermon Text for September 4, 2016

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Matthew 20:1-16, Genesis 43:26-34

“It isn’t fair”

Have you ever heard anyone questions God’s fairness, or better yet have you ever heard yourself say that something isn’t fair because we have lived a certain life and we deserve better? One of the classic questions of life is: is God fair? We are used to a system of incentives at work and with relationships that deal with a carrot and stick approach. If you are good and do what you are told then you get a reward. Conversely if you are unproductive and disobey then you get a punishment. It is a simple system and one that we assume the world runs on. When the pilgrims landed on this land that was the system that they set up. If you don’t work, you don’t eat. It’s simple, right? Seems fair to all of us, doesn’t it?

But guess what? God does not work according to that system. God does not reward and punish us based upon whether we have been good or bad. In life the good people do not have all things and the bad people have nothing, but rather as Jesus states in Matthew 5:45, God makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

In our Scripture in Genesis and in Matthew we will discover what system God uses, and it is one that we would classify as unfair if it were a system that anyone tried to use in the world. Yet, hopefully, we will learn to base our own judgments not on what is happening around us to whom, but rather what God has done for us in our life. I think at the end of today we will praise God that God is not fair, or else we would all be in a world of trouble.

A lot has been happening over this past week which has been immensely interesting and relevant to me, I hope it is to you as well. I came within inches of posting on our sign out front the following phrase: “Would Jesus have stood for the anthem?” Provocative, it would have made, I would guess, more than 75% of you very angry with me. Colin Kapernick’s refusal to stand for the national anthem struck me as a bit interesting here in Lancaster County where less than ¼ of the people who go to a baseball game or a high school sporting even put their hand over their heart. Do you notice that? In this Mennonite heavy demographic area we have, this is not scientific now, the lowest percentage of people who honor the anthem in a way that most people in our country would think you would honor it.

The school where my girls go don’t even play the national anthem of any of their sporting events, in fact, you would be hard pressed to find an American flag anywhere on campus. Now, I am

not diving into the debate about the flag, I am not at all, I know this church has been through that and it was painful and it no one won that battle. What I would like to look at briefly is the why he has chosen to kneel next to a green beret during the anthem instead of standing with his hand over his heart.

Ultimately it comes down to fairness. His point is that not every citizen in the United States is treated the same, and so by extension that means that not every citizen is treated fairly. I love America, I have traveled so much around the world that every time I come back and say this is the greatest country in the world. We don't have to make it great again, it is great, it is unique, it is without precedence, but not everyone is treated the same. A black person going through our criminal justice system simply is not treated the same a white person. They will end up in jail sooner and longer for the same offense. A black person will be stopped more often than a white person on the street in a car. The statistics simply prove that. Today, we are talking about fairness, and what does it have to do about our Scripture reading and about God? Why are we into politics? Because God not only wants us to treat each other the same and fairly, but he has given us a tremendous advantage over sin and death and satan simply because he does not treat us fairly, for the good. Let's look.

The Joseph story is at the good part, we are really close to the climax of the story. Joseph's brothers arrive in Egypt with their presents and their little brother Benjamin in tow. It is right before noon and Joseph sets them up at his house for lunch. When they arrive Joseph is out working so they have to wait for a little while until he gets home.

When he gets home they give their present to Joseph and they all bow down before him. Remember every time you hear of them doing that you should be thinking of the fulfillment of the dream that is taking place. He immediately asks how his father is doing. He calls him the "old man". You should wonder about the origin of some terms that we use now in the English language. The Bible is replete with etymological examples. The brothers respond by saying that he is alive and well, and bow down again to him. The trend continues where we see his position over and against that of his brothers.

Joseph's next question deals with Benjamin, his only full brother, the son of his mother. He spots him and asks the question is this your youngest brother, and before they are able to answer him he blurts out: "God be gracious to you, my son." It becomes obvious that Joseph cares tremendously for this boy. Not only does he bless him which is highly unusual for a man of Joseph's position and Benjamin's lowly state as the youngest brother of a group of 11 foreign nomads, but Scripture states that Joseph's emotions were literally boiling over, or Joseph was warm for Benjamin.

The only other time that we have this type of reaction in Scripture is in Hosea 11:8 where we find God's love and passion for Israel is so strong that his emotions boiling over. We find this deep, intense, unparalleled love that Joseph has for Benjamin much like God has for his people. Well, Joseph almost loses it, he goes off by himself and washes his face to conceal his emotions and demands that the meal be served. The description of the meal in this passage is somewhat unusual. Joseph is eating by himself, the brothers are eating by themselves, and the Egyptians are eating by themselves. The image is of a family at dinner time as the father is reading the paper, the daughter is watching TV, the son is playing a Game Boy, while the woman is feeding the child in his high chair.

But the brothers are all sitting together and as they look at each other they notice that they are sitting in order of age, from oldest to youngest. That they are even allowed to eat at Joseph's house is amazing enough, but that then they are put in order of age without anyone ever telling the host their age, is downright eerie. When the meal is served, the food comes directly from Joseph's table and the youngest son, the one traditionally left out of everything and the least important, receives 5 times the amount of food that any of the other brothers had received. I guess it is a common thing for the youngest son to have a very good appetite. The brothers are watching all of this take place and are amazed. Nowhere in Scripture does it say that they were indignant, after all their baby brother who had missed the first trip and who had done none of the work to get here, they had done all of the work, was getting this enormously preferential treatment, but nowhere does it mention that they were upset. No place do we hear, hey, this isn't fair. Instead the last words that we have in this passage is that because of this extravagant display of affection toward one of them, they were all merry and they all celebrated together. For them just being invited to the feast was enough cause for celebration.

What a difference between the Genesis reading which allows us to experience the gratitude of the brothers being able to be in Joseph's presence even while the little brother is being lavished with food and special attention. But this parable in Matthew that I call the good employer, some call the disgruntled workers but you always need to look at the positive side of things. A man hires five different groups of workers. The first he hires at six in the morning to work all day, twelve hours, and he agrees to pay them a full day work. For the sake of argument, we will say about \$100. He then goes out at 9 and hires more, he doesn't tell them how much but just that they will get paid equitably. Again 12, and 3 and then finally at 5 with only one hour to work. According to Jewish law the workers had to be paid that same day and so they all lined up, the employer calls out those who had worked the least first, they had only worked one hour. He gives them \$100. This continues until he gets to the group that

had worked twelve hours and he gives them \$100. They complain, they say it isn't fair, right? Is it fair? Of course it isn't fair, come one think about it. A person who works one hour gets paid the same for someone who works 12. Some have called this the parable of the affirmative action employer. When we read this parable our sense of justice screams and feels slighted because, well, you just don't do that. It just isn't fair. But this isn't any employer, this is God.

This Scripture deals with what is going to happen on judgment day and what it will be like when we are before God's throne. It deals like Joseph with the final banquet when in the eyes of the public, for all to see we will catch a glimpse of God's judgment and we will not think it is fair. Why don't we think it is fair? Not because anyone received less than what they had been promised but because some, many, will receive more than they deserve.

What this parable and the banquet held by Joseph describe is a God whose grace is so amazing that it is not fair because it is offered to all people, every single person because God's emotions boil over when he thinks of us. Remember this parable as an answer to Peter's question earlier of, he frames it like this: "We have sold our house and lands and all that we have, so what kind of a reward will be waiting for us in the kingdom?" He is really saying no one else deserves more of a reward than we do so we should have a good one, right?

Paul tells us in Philippians that he realized one day after complaining to God about a thorn in his side that God was telling him "my grace is sufficient for you". All we need for a reward, all we need for an assurance is the sufficiency of God's grace. Because God's grace is the great equalizer because it puts everyone on an even playing field. All are invited to the banquet and even if one gets 5 times his share are all able to eat and rejoice? Even if someone enters the kingdom at the last hour, all are paid the same wage, which is eternal life. It isn't fair, God's justice is not fair.

We should all be breathing a sigh of relief right not because if God gave according to what we deserved we would all be in trouble. The reality of the fact is that we are all 11th hour workers, none of us deserve a place at our Savior table. We should all be like Joseph's brothers just happy to have been invited to the banquet through the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. That should be enough. There are some who have devoted their entire life, generations in their family having been in the church or in the ministry, my family would be included that in that group. We have the tendency to think that, like Peter, there is some special reward set aside for us. As if the sacrifice of our Savior is not enough, there ought to be more, as if spending a lifetime in his grace and wonder is not reward enough. As if being in his presence all the days of our life is not enough, there needs to be more?

In churches there can be the tendency for the workers, you know who you are, to resent the newcomers. After all this church was built on our time and money and talents. But it is easy, the more we live in God's grace, the longer we have had God by our side, the less we may recognize the amazingness of God's grace. As Scripture states the one for whom much is forgiven, much love will be present. But God's grace is sufficient for both. How upset will we be if we get to judgment day find that God has let in those who wasted their life away in sin and debauchery? How mad will we be when we get to the banquet table after a life of service and find those who didn't spend a single day walking with the creator? We will probably want to say, it isn't fair.

Thank God that God's grace is sufficient reward for all of us and that God is not fair, because if God were fair, not a single one of us would be celebrating eternity with him. Thanks be to God that fairness is judged by God's compassion and grace and not our twisted sense of reality. Amen.