

**Sermon for Sunday, September 24, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

It's not fair. That's what I thought on Tuesday  
when I went to the firehouse to see if I needed to vote  
for the budget.  
the parking lot was full, so I circled round to a safe place  
to wait for someone to leave.  
And just as I was about to pull in,  
someone cut in front of me.  
"I was waiting for that spot" I yelled.  
"I've been blocking the street," she replied, "so I get it."  
"I was waiting longer than you. But I was being safe! Just because you have a bigger car  
and don't care about blocking traffic...."  
Not my finest moment.  
Even though I was right. And she wasn't.

It's not fair.  
The idea of fairness  
is one of those things  
that seems to be inherent in us.  
"Be fair," is one of those things  
that we repeatedly tell our children;  
just as they repeatedly tell us, especially with reference to their siblings,  
"It's not fair!"

And isn't that the first thing  
that came into your mind  
when you heard Jesus' parable  
about the laborers  
in the vineyard?  
It was for me.  
And it certainly is for the day laborers  
who were hired first thing in the morning  
and worked hard in the heat all day,  
only to discover  
that they would have been paid the same amount  
if they hadn't shown up until mid afternoon.

“It’s not fair.”

And when Jesus ends his parable,  
“the last will be first, and the first will be last,”  
it sounds awful like  
God is not being fair.

But let’s go back  
and see what got us to this point.  
Because Jesus didn’t just tell this parable  
straight after the one we read last week  
about the slave who owed  
an incredible amount of money  
who was forgiven it,  
then went and had one of his co-workers thrown into jail  
for owing him a tiny amount of money.  
And so the original debt  
was reinstated,  
as we might hope,  
and all was fair.

But between that parable and this one  
there’s a whole chapter  
in the gospel of Matthew.  
And in that chapter  
Jesus has two different interactions  
that start to challenge  
many of the assumptions  
that his disciples have.

The first is  
when the children are brought to Jesus  
to be blessed.  
And the disciples  
are a little annoyed.  
They’ve been focussed on Jesus’ teaching  
and now they can’t hear anything for the noise of the kids.  
“Take them away,” they say to the parents.  
“This isn’t a place for children.”  
But Jesus overhears them.

“No,” he says, “bring them to me. Don’t stop them! It’s to people like these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

And the kids come up to him  
and he blesses them.

And then someone else comes up, a young man.

“Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

“Do you keep the commandments?” Jesus asks.

“Which ones?”

“The ten...you know them...”

“Yes, of course I do. What else do I have to do?”

“If you want to be perfect, how about you go sell everything you own and give the proceeds to the poor.”

And the young man  
went away.

Because he couldn’t imagine  
giving up everything  
that he owned.

But notice

what happened there.

Jesus never actually  
answered the young man’s question.

He never told him  
what deed he had to do to enter eternal life.

All he told him  
was how to be perfect.

And that was,  
and is,  
impossible.

No wonder Jesus then said to his disciples  
those well known words:

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

“Hmm,” think the disciples.

“you must have to give up everything to make it to heaven.

So we’re good. We’ve done that.

We’ve given up our homes, our families, our livelihoods. Surely we’ll make it.”

And of course it's Peter  
that blurts out  
what they are all thinking.

And Jesus sighs.  
"Yes, Peter, you'll all get to heaven. Don't worry.  
But have you actually heard anything I've been saying?"

Because Peter and the other disciples  
are still stuck on the idea  
that they can somehow earn their way to heaven.  
That if they are good enough,  
if they give enough away,  
if they manage to reach,  
some magical gold standard,  
they will make it.

But is that really what Jesus has been saying?  
I don't think so.

First  
we have the children.  
They have done nothing,  
nothing  
other than show up at the prodding  
of whoever brought them.  
And they have nothing to offer,  
nothing except  
their presence.  
And Jesus welcomes them,  
and promises them  
the kingdom of heaven.

Then we have the young man.  
He has everything  
to commend him.  
He is young, and has already made  
a success of his life.  
He is faithful - he has kept all the rules.  
But he is asking the wrong question.

He is asking  
what he has to do  
to make it to heaven.  
And Jesus says,  
he can't.  
There is nothing he can do  
that will get him to heaven.  
Nothing.  
And he leaves.  
But what if he had stayed?  
What if he had heard the parable we read today?  
What difference  
might it have made?

Because you see  
what's key about our parable  
is that it makes no difference  
how much the laborers have worked.  
They could have put in ten hours  
or a mere two,  
they still get the same.  
Because when it comes to the kingdom of God  
there is nothing we can do  
to earn our place.  
Nothing.  
It is the gift of God.  
God's grace is free.  
All we have to do  
is receive it.  
And there's more than enough  
for everyone.

It's probably one of the hardest things to get our heads around in the gospels,  
this notion that there's nothing that we can do  
to earn our way  
into the kingdom of God.  
Because pretty much every other part of our life  
depends on us earning our way.  
Often with money -  
where we live,

how we eat,  
what car we drive,  
what clothes we wear,  
even what school we attend,  
all those things, in the end,  
depend on how much  
we earn.  
And all those things  
give us status.  
People use them as cues  
to work out where we fit in the social hierarchy.

And then there's staying power.  
Being a long time member of a group  
gives you status.  
Being a certain age.  
And then there are those things that we're born with -  
our gender,  
our race,  
our sexual orientation.

All of these things  
and many more  
go towards our understanding  
of who is in  
and who is out.

And there's a kind of fairness to it  
because we have criteria  
on which we can assess people.

But that's not  
how God works.  
"God shows no partiality" is how the apostle Peter said it  
when he was preaching to the centurion Cornelius  
in Caesarea.

God has no bias  
is another way of putting it.  
And to be honest, the way God works

is not fair.  
Not fair  
if your criteria for inclusion into the kingdom of God  
is earning it.  
But if your criteria for inclusion  
is being willing to receive the gift  
then God is absolutely fair.  
Because the criteria is the same for everyone.  
Just come  
and ask for God's blessing.  
Just as the thief did  
on the cross  
as Jesus hung dying  
beside him  
"Today you will be with me in Paradise."

One of the great joys of being a priest  
is watching our children come to communion.  
Even the tiniest ones,  
Vinnie and Ava,  
know that this is something special.  
They look at me with such trust in their eyes  
as they put out their hands  
to receive the body of Christ.  
But they aren't the only ones.  
It's immensely humbling  
when our venerable members  
do the same.  
They are reaching in faith  
to Christ,  
open hands  
to receive his gift.

And that's why  
I consecrate so much wine each week.  
Not because I want to waste it,  
or because I have a particular desire for wine this early in the morning.  
No, it's because that wine,  
Christ's blood,  
is an embodiment

of the grace of God.  
No one,  
no one  
has to drink the dregs.  
There is always more than enough  
for all of us - first and last alike.

The last shall be first  
and the first shall be last.  
All of us  
all of us  
who come with longing  
not depending on ourselves  
but depending on the grace of God,  
all of us  
will receive  
the kingdom of God.