

Sermon—Proper 20A—September 24, 2017  
Compassion versus Fairness  
Matthew 20:1-16

Compassion and fairness often conflict with each other. Compassion often goes beyond the expected to relieve someone's pain. Fairness is giving exactly what someone deserves.

Today's Gospel from Matthew deals with this conflict between fairness and compassion. We often face this conflict in our own lives.

Arousing our desire for fairness is quite simple. All we have to do is look around us. People are not equally blessed. In fact, it appears that those who have worked the hardest often have fewer rewards to show for it. Conversely, some who have done very little live lives of privilege and luxury. It's not fair!

It also seems to us that many people who have done wrong are treated lightly by our justice system. They don't get what they deserve. It's just not fair!

Compassion for the undeserving is often misunderstood in our day and time. Much pain in life is brought on by our own actions and thus it is deserved. Why should compassion be given? Yet we recognize that it takes compassion to heal the wounds of our lives--whether we deserve them or not.

Compassion and fairness represent the ideals of two kingdoms. The Kingdom of Heaven, which Jesus proclaims, is governed by His compassion. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is His ultimate act of compassion. Conversely, the kingdoms of this world hold up fairness as the ideal of a just society. It's interesting to me that compassion is endorsed in the Bible far more than fairness.

Most of the references to fairness in the Bible have to do with physical beauty. There are none comparing fairness with justice. On the other hand, compassion is recommended in at least 43 passages.

Today's Gospel from Matthew highlights the significance of God's compassion against the backdrop of fairness as Jesus tells a story of a landowner who employs laborers to harvest his vineyard. The earlier group of workers, hired at 6 AM had a definite contract with the owner to work for the standard daily wage—enough to feed their families for that day. They had the security of knowing that their needs would be taken care of—at least for that day. It illustrates the fact that employees need to be treated fairly and the owner does just that.

The workers hired at nine, twelve, three, and five o' clock had no such assurance—except the word of the owner that he would give them what is right.

They went to work on faith that things would work out right for them.

When the workday ended, the most recently employed workers were paid first—a full day's wage—enough to feed their families that evening. What an act of compassion! Fairness

would have dictated one hour's pay, not a full day's wage.

When the earlier workers stepped up to receive their pay, they thought that they should have received more because they worked longer. Yet they too received the full day's wage—enough to meet their families' needs. The owner had fulfilled his contract. They had been treated fairly. Yet they perceived themselves to have been treated unfairly because they compared themselves to the laborers who had worked a shorter time. They missed perceiving the owner's compassion for those hired later who had as much need as the laborers hired earlier under a definite contract.

The owner's compassion in this case had gone beyond the limits of fairness to do what was right.

When we apply this parable to the way we relate to God and each other, some strong points come to light.

The standard of fairness is a very exacting judge, but not very compassionate. If God related to us only by the standard of fairness, we would

not even be alive. God's judgment of our sins is perfect. We are imperfect. None of us measure up to God's exacting standards. Consider the fact that life itself is an undeserved gift. We did nothing to deserve the privilege of being alive. Life comes as a gift from God even before we do anything deserving or undeserving.

This parable makes a basic assumption about God when it has the owner saying, "I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" (Matt. 20:14-15) The owner chose to show compassion with his resources. God, the owner of everything we enjoy, chooses to do the same with us.

Truly understanding this outpouring of compassion relieves us of a tremendous burden of having to calculate degrees of fairness. We can expend a lot of energy doing this and it will finally wear us out. God knows this and in order to avoid this burnout, He wants us to concentrate on His compassionate grace toward us.

The workers who came later in the day were deeply aware of the owner's compassion for them. God wants us to experience His compassion for us. It's not based upon our maturity in the Christian faith. It does not take into account how long we have served in God's vineyard or the depth of our commitment to Jesus and His Church. It is centered in His heart.

It is here that our accountability to God begins.

How deeply do we trust Him to do what is best for us without worrying about what He might do for others? You see, that's how God serves us. He doesn't count the cost or calculate its relative value to what He does for someone else. That's service in perfect freedom—even to the point of Jesus giving His life for us on the cross. It was a perfect act of compassion offered freely for us.

Jesus wants us to gain that same perception of compassionate service in perfect freedom. The Parable of the Laborers is a picture of relationships functioning within the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus came to deliver us

from the tyranny of fairness so that we may be free to serve one another compassionately within His Kingdom.

Compassion versus fairness—in God's Kingdom, compassion prevails!