

## *"Being Thankful When Life Isn't Fair"*

Matthew 20:1-16  
Philippians 1:21-30  
Exodus 16:2-15  
November 23, 2008  
Thanksgiving Sunday

Reaching the end of a job interview, the human resources person asked a young engineer fresh out of MIT, "And what starting salary were you looking for?"

The engineer said, "In the neighborhood of \$140,000 a year, depending on the benefits package." The interviewer said, "What would you say to a package of 5-weeks vacation, 14 paid holidays, full medical and dental, company matching retirement up to 50% of your salary, and a company car leased every 2 years – say, a red Corvette?"

The young engineer sat up straight and said, "Wow! Are you kidding?" To which the interviewer replied, "Well sure, but you started it."

I remember one time watching a couple of hot air balloons rising up into the sky. And a child said, "Those are prayers for Rickey and Niki." Those two balloons went absolutely straight up until they were out of sight. Sometimes it may seem our prayers and best wishes go straight to God. Other times it seems like cross-winds blow and those prayers must never get to the ear of God.

"Why is God letting this happen?" we ask when things are awful. But we don't ask that question when things are going well. When was the last time you felt like complaining to God?

It's not fair! Why do I have to go to bed early? Why are you grounding me? Why do I have to help with the dishes? Why did he have to get sick? Why did she get the promotion? Why did they have to cut my job?

A Forbes Magazine article one time carried the title: Why do we feel so bad when we have it so good?

Maybe what we've got here is an attitude problem. I get the sense sometimes that people think because they are Christians, or because they believe in God, because they consider themselves good people – that somehow they are to be immune from the routine troubles of life.

We look for a way to not have trouble and especially tragedy, and there are many who teach that if you are a Christian God will "reward" you. We seem to be part of a country where the word "entitlement" has become common. The idea that we deserve something.

I think of the old black janitor at the theological school I attended. He was a happy and delightful fellow to be around. He did not appear to have a thing. You wondered how tough life must be for him. He appeared to be just getting by. But after he died and his will was opened, it was discovered that he left over \$125,000 to the school for a scholarship fund.

A “Hi and Lois” cartoon had the teenager, the older of 2 sons, wailing away on his guitar. The younger brother says – that’s neat, can you teach me to play like that? The older brother said – you can’t play like that until you’ve really suffered. The next frame has the little brother in dark glasses walking around moaning and groaning. What the matter with him – asks Hi. I don’t know, says Lois – he was quite cheerful this morning.

Someone suggested that the real question of most religions is not – what is the meaning of life, but “why does it have to hurt?” Remember how old Tevya in Fiddler on the Roof complains, “God, is this really necessary?” And because there is no obvious answer, we run and hide from suffering as a natural act.

This parable from Jesus should leave us feeling a little off balance. It leaves us re-examining God and how God relates to us. The God of the vineyard is a God who acts in strange and mysterious ways, a god who keeps us a little off balance, and a god we should not take for granted.

Just when we think we have God figured out .....

Some of these guys may have shown up at the place of employment on time, ready to work, but were not needed during the early hours of the day. They may have only been asked to help out as the day wore on. I have heard stories about people who would show up for work at some place during the Depression – and just wait to take the place of someone who didn’t show up.

So if we get ourselves caught up in this parable and think it isn’t fair the way some of these people got treated – it might be because we see ourselves as the people at the front of the line, the people who started work in the morning.

What if we were to begin thinking of ourselves as the ones at the end of the line, instead of assuming that we would be at the front of the line? God’s grace is something that none of us can deserve or earn, and instead of complaining about the people who budge in line ahead of us, maybe we ought to remember the long line behind us into which we cut our way by the grace of God.

I would like to propose several thoughts this morning.

**One**, give thanks to God for everything.

**Two**, receive everything you have as a gift from God.

**Three**, never give in to comparing what you have to what everyone else seems to have. Let God be your model, let Jesus be your model, not the world. Otherwise you will never be happy, you will always be miserable. For you can never keep up with the world. The world can never get enough, and if you follow the lead of the world, you will never be able to get enough. If you follow God you will always have enough, and you will always be satisfied.

**Four**, God gives to us out of His wisdom. Maybe He gives us what we are capable of handling.

**Five**, Paul reminds us of priorities – live as God wants you to live.

**Six**, never resent what has been given to you, or question why. Never.

**Seven**, remember the life of service. The life of giving. For that is the most satisfying life of all. I saw a quote from a famous rich man who said that the only true investment he ever made was what he gave away. None of the rest of it was ever safe. Boy – he’s got it.

When Kevin Cass was growing up he attended Bethlehem United Methodist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. One time he went on a whitewater rafting trip with his youth group in North Carolina. He wrote a report in the church newsletter:

“The water temperature was 42 degrees. There were five rafts and only three guides in our group. 7 of the youth that had rafted there before decided to go it alone. We had just about got the hang of paddling together when things started to get hairy. We got hung up on a bunch of rocks, and some of us had to get out to free the raft. By this time, all the other rafts in our group had gone by us. It was very frustrating being stuck there for so long. It seemed like we would never get unstuck.

Suddenly we saw a boy ahead of us fall out of his raft. He was alone. Without talking, we paddled toward him. On the first try, we were unsuccessful at getting him in the boat and went over him. Then, as the guys stabilized the raft, the girls pulled him in. He was very cold and spitting water and couldn’t talk. He just shook. We immediately took him to shore and wrapped him in a thermal blanket.

We were really glad he was going to be ok. Now we all realized that by being stuck on those rocks for so long, we were in the right place at the right time. It made us grateful for the hard time because we knew God put us where we were needed.”

The fun scripture today is in Exodus where the people whom God has freed from slavery in Egypt are whining to Moses about how he brought them into the desert to starve them. After all they had been through. “We wish the Lord had killed us in Egypt.” Any food in the desert, any water in the desert should be appreciated. And as they complained, God provided them manna and quail.

When God’s people were looking around wondering where their food was, where God’s blessing for their life was – the story proclaims - look around! There’s nourishment right here. It’s all around you. That is the way God taught them to quit looking back, and learn to appreciate the bounty before them in every moment. The miracle was in turning from complaining about how good they had it in the good ‘ole days – to trusting God to provide today.