

2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN LENT  
FEBRUARY 28/MARCH 1, 2015

PASTOR SCOTT FULLER  
MATTHEW 20:1-16



*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

A poem by Robert Fulghum, entitled:

"ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN KINDERGARTEN"

**Most** of what I **really** need to know about:  
how to live            and what to do and            how to be...  
I learned in kindergarten.  
Wisdom was not at the **top** of the graduate school **mountain**,  
But **there** in the **sand-pile** at **Sunday** school.

These are the things I learned:  
Share everything.  
Play fair.  
Don't hit people.  
Put things back where you found them.  
Clean up your own mess.  
Don't take things that aren't yours.  
Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.  
Wash your hands before you eat.  
Flush.  
Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.  
Live a balanced life -  
**Learn** some            and **think** some  
And **draw** and **paint** and **sing** and **dance**  
And **play** and **work** *everyday some*.  
Take a nap every afternoon.  
When you go out into the world, Watch out for traffic,  
Hold hands and stick together.  
Be aware of wonder.

<http://www.scrapbook.com/poems/doc/842.html>

That's a great poem – as **well** as a wonderful treatise on how to provide ourselves with a framework, a footing, a foundation for a good and peace-filled life.

Did you notice the first two rules mentioned? *Share everything* and *Play fair*. **Fairness** really is the lifeblood of peaceful human society. A community that values *fairness* creates an environment in which the greatest majority of people have the greatest chance to thrive...

Until recently, we were convinced that this commitment to fairness was an exclusively human trait. Argued many psychologists, philosophers and *pastors: that is what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom*.

However, it's been discovered that a sense of fairness and even empathy can be found in groups of animals throughout the world.

Dr. Frans de Waal is a Professor in the Psychology Department of Emory University, and well-known for his work on the behavior and social intelligence of primates. He presented a TED Talk in 2011 entitled, *Moral Behavior in Animals*.

He talked about their “fairness study” in which two chimpanzees were put side by side in a cage separated by a wire-mesh wall. The instructor taught the chimps that if they picked up a rock from within the cage and gave it to her, she would give them a bite of food.

Once they had the routine down, the instructor changed the program, altering the menu for the **second** chimp. The **first** one completed the task and got a piece of cucumber. The second chimp was rewarded... with a **grape**. When the instructor tried to give the **first** chimp **another** piece of cucumber, he threw it back at her and started raising a ruckus. In behavior that reminded me of our kids when they were little, I could tell the chimp was yelling, *That's not fair! That's not fair!*

From there, the professor went on to share something even **more** fascinating. In another study, one animal would be given a piece of food, while at the same time, its partner would receive a **shock**. He said that in animals across the spectrum – including rats, mice, dogs and birds – their behavior was the same. Once the animal realized the connection between **its food** and its partner's **discomfort**, it would then refuse to eat. [http://www.ted.com/talks/frans\\_de\\_waal\\_do\\_animals\\_have\\_morals](http://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_do_animals_have_morals)

Isn't that amazing?

Remember the first two rules from the poem:

-Share everything.

-Play fair.

So let's take a closer look at Jesus' parable: **What about it is fair?**

-early workers got what they agreed on – that's the definition of fair!

-everyone got the same – that's as fair as you can get, right?

-the owner gives everyone a chance to work

**What is it about the story that's NOT fair?**

-It feels like those who worked longer should have been paid more

-It also wasn't exactly fair for the owner to pay the newest workers first.

Had the longest workers been paid first, they would have been on their way home and none the wiser...

But here's the kicker: Jesus starts this story by saying, *The kingdom of heaven is like...* **So what does this story teach us about the kingdom of heaven???** *When we find ourselves standing before the pearly gates, will we get what's fair, that which we deserve – and would that be good news or bad???*

Well, the Law from Moses says, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. That is as fair as it can be.

In Matthew 6, Jesus says, *You have heard it said, **You shall not murder**...but I say to you that if you're angry with a neighbor, you will be liable to judgment...* and that **also** is fair...

And then St. Paul says quite succinctly, *The wages of sin is death...*

So maybe...maybe we're looking for something **other** than what's fair... Because if we demand what is **fair**, that we should get what we **deserve**, that we really should receive what we have **coming** to us, then I think we'd all have to admit that we may not like the results... For the truth is that God's love is anything BUT fair...far from it!

Listen to these verses from the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel:

*<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who were hanged (on the cross) kept deriding (Jesus) and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" <sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? <sup>41</sup> **And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.**" <sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." <sup>43</sup> He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

I guess we shouldn't be surprised to hear that **fairness** is **not** the most important virtue to Jesus. After all, he's the only One who truly knows how **unfair** life can be.

No, God's love is **not fair**...but it **is** full of **grace**!! Thanks be to God that the Lord does **not** demand from us an eye for an eye, and that we are no longer condemned to die for our sins. That has already been done by another, whose suffering and death were the epitome of what is NOT fair...all of which is very, VERY good news for us.

Thanks be to God that the Lord's love is **not** fair, and thanks be to God that the Lord's love **is** full of **grace**. For **then**, and **only** then, is there comfort and consolation for us all.

You see, God's highly UNFAIR love destroys our clamoring for fairness, and does, instead, strange and wonderful things like:

- lifting up the lowly and humbling the proud,
- feeding the hungry and healing the sick,
- bringing hope to the dying and
- forgiving all of us who are by nature sinful and unclean.

The story is told of the famous Scottish preacher James Stewart who summarized this truth of God's love in a one-sentence sermon delivered at the funeral of the town drunk. The unfortunate man, in a drunken stupor, had died after falling off his horse. And much to the townspeople's dismay, Pastor Stewart had agreed to bury the man in the cemetery of the church.

*It's not fair*, they said, *for those good and faithful servants to have such a sinner buried in their midst!* Needless to say, the church was packed – and not because the people cared about the man who had died. When it came time for the sermon, Pastor Stewart stood in the pulpit, looked out upon his fair-minded congregation, and said, *The brief moment between the saddle and the ground is a lifetime for God to work the miracle of faith.*

No, God's love is not fair –

- where we deserve punishment for sin, God gives us forgiveness;
- where we deserve the emptiness of despair, God fills us with faith;
- and where we deserve death, God gives us resurrection – all of us who are far less than the best, but still **loved** the best...by Jesus Christ.

Amen.