Sunday, September 19, 1999
WHAT TO DO WHEN LIFE ISN'T FAIR
Matthew 20:1-16

Most of us would agree that life is unfair. If all of life were completely fair, then we would all be equal in every way — athletic ability, I.Q., artistic talent, musical competence, mathematical aptitude, and more. We would all be like the people in Garrison Keillor's hometown, Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

Whenever I hear people say, "Life is unfair," and then wonder what to do about it, I think of the opening statement in Dr. M. Scott Peck's best-selling book, The Road Less Traveled. He begins the book by writing, "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult, once we truly understand and accept it, then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

In other words, the fact that life is difficult becomes a given. It's like accepting the fact that the weather changes. It will never be constant or totally to your liking. So today, whether the sun is shining or the rain is falling, there's not much you can do about it except complain if you don't like it or accept it and go about your business as best as possible. The important thing is not to take it personally. It helps me to remember that Jesus said, "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

The same is true with the fact that life is unfair. What do you do when life is unfair? The first thing you do is acknowledge that it's true.

Here's a true story about a man named Gerald that illustrates what I mean. Gerald's wife, his four-year-old daughter, and his mother were killed instantly in a terrible auto accident. Following the accident, people kept asking him, "Why you?" One person went on to say, "Your family appeared so ideal. This tragedy is a terrible injustice. If it can happen to you, it can happen to any one of us. Now no one is safe."

As Gerald thought about it, he agreed. No one is safe because the world in which we live is hardly a safe place. It is often mean, unpredictable, and unjust. Loss has little to do with our notions of fairness. Some people live long, safe lives, even though from our point of view we think they deserve to suffer. Others endure one loss after another, though it seems to us they deserve to be blessed. Loss is no more a respecter of persons and position than good fortune. Life is filled with good luck and bad luck, and it is not evenly distributed.

Following the accident, Gerald kept asking, "Why me? Why did the loss happen to me and our other three children? Why at such a young age? Why in the prime of life?"

There are no adequate and satisfying answers to such questions. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Sometimes we have some control over what happens or doesn't happen, and sometimes we do not. As Reinhold Niebuhr's well-known prayer says, "O God, give us serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish one from the other."

Sometimes in addition to asking “Why me?” it helps to ask the opposite question, “Why not me?” When you ask, “Why is there so much evil in the world?” you also need to ask, “Why is there so much good in the world?”

So, what do you do when life is unfair? The first step as Christians is to acknowledge that life is often unfair.

But the second and equally important question is, how do you respond to life’s unfairness? The overwhelming temptation is to compare your life with others who appear to be more fortunate and then to respond with envy. And that’s the wrong response. The face of envy is never beautiful. That’s why envy is listed as one of the seven deadly sins. We tend to envy people who are better-looking, or who have more money, or who live in a nicer home, or who have better luck, or a higher-paying job, or any one of many other benefits and privileges that we by comparison do not have. We may very well have all that we need, but when we compare ourselves to others, we can become envious.

Envy has a mirror image. You’ve no doubt noticed that when someone you envy gets into trouble, or has bad luck, few among us are able to suppress a feeling of secret satisfaction. Some years ago, I did a sermon on this subject with a German word as the title, Schadenfreude, which according to one German scholar translates as “the enjoyable sin of enjoying others’ misfortunes.”

We gain nothing positive from envy. It makes us bitter and unhappy. One of the most destructive forms of envy today is caused by the widespread false assumption that everyone should be able to do, experience, and enjoy everything that everyone else does.

The worst part of envy is that it not only causes us to feel bad because of someone else’s gifts or good fortune when compared to ours, but it also causes us to devalue our own gifts.

As I have noted before in other sermons, when I come across someone who is a better preacher than I am, if I become envious, then my first tendency is to think of myself as a worse preacher. What I forget is that hearing someone who is a better preacher does not take anything away from me. I am the same person I always was. The person who is a better preacher didn’t take some of my talent and add it to theirs. If that were true, that would mean there is only a certain amount of preaching talent available in the world, and I can only get better by taking some from someone else. That’s how ridiculous envy can be. The truth is there is an unlimited supply of preaching talent available. My getting better does not make someone else worse.

There’s even a more destructive facet to envy. Merely to feel bad because I do not have something another has is not the worst part of envy. The worst part is when you wish the other person did not have whatever it is you do not have so that you do not suffer your imaginary disadvantage.

Jesus knew that one of the most destructive temptations for human beings is to become envious. He was schooled in the Old Testament, and it has many stories of the destructive aspect of envy. King Saul’s envy of the young shepherd David drove Saul out of his mind. Cain’s envy of his brother Abel caused him to kill Abel.

Envy is a major character in the parable that Jesus told about the laborers in the vineyard. The owner of a vineyard needed to have his grapes picked. Early in the morning, he went to the

marketplace to hire workers for the day. They agreed on a fair wage for the day's work. Later in the morning, he returned and hired more workers and agreed to pay them a fair wage. At noon and at three o'clock, he went back and each time hired more workers. Then with only an hour's work remaining in the day, he went and hired yet more workers.

In the parable, Jesus does not tell us why the owner didn't hire all the available workers early in the morning. Maybe he wasn't sure he would need all of them.

We can assume that all those who were waiting for work in the marketplace needed the money for their families and wanted to work. That's why they were there. It wasn't their fault they weren't hired early in the morning or in the middle of the day.

At the end of the day, the owner told his payroll clerk to pay each of the workers, but in reverse order — beginning with those who had been hired last and worked the shortest hours and then on down to those who had been working the most hours.

Then came the big surprise. He paid each worker a full day's wages, even though some had worked only one hour, some three, some six, some nine, and some twelve. When those who had worked all day discovered that those who had worked shorter hours received the same pay, they were furious. It wasn't fair. And they said that.

The owner, hearing their complaints, reminded them that he had not defrauded them in any way. He paid them what they had together agreed on as a fair wage. Then he added: "Why should you be envious because I choose to be generous to those who have stood all day in the marketplace looking for work, worrying that they would not be able to earn enough to keep themselves and feed their families? Why are you so envious of my generosity and their good fortune?"

The same envy is displayed by the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son. He said to his father, "It isn't fair that my younger brother should receive a welcome like this when I have stayed home all these years and worked hard. No one ever gave a party in my honor."

There are a number of things in life that aren't fair, especially when we begin making comparisons. Why does it bother us? Why are we envious when someone else is treated generously, even though we already have enough or have been treated fairly? Why is it so difficult for us to rejoice at another's good fortune?

Could it be that envy springs from a feeling of insecurity about our own worth as human beings? If we truly felt good about ourselves, would we always be comparing ourselves to others?

What to do when life is unfair? The first step for those of us who claim to be Christian is to acknowledge that life is not always going to be fair, especially from our point of view. The second step is to avoid responding with envy. It does us more harm than good. When we are envious, we can no longer see the goodness and grace of God.

Anyone who looks at God's blessings with one eye and with the other eye tries to keep track of whether others are receiving a little bit more soon becomes incapable of recognizing any blessings in this life at all. We become scorekeepers rather than those who know we are infinitely loved by God.

Now let's consider another question. Where is God in life's unfairness? The answer to this question is the main point of this story about the workers in the vineyard.

What we need to remember is that the purpose of this parable is not to give us advice on how to run our business or pay workers. It is a story about God's grace. Jesus began the story by saying, "The realm of God is like the owner of a vineyard who went out early in the morning to hire workers."

With this story, Jesus is reminding us that God loves us equally in spite of life's unfairness. This story tells us that we do not earn God's love — it is always given to us unconditionally. God gives us all the love we need. All we have to do is be open and accept it.

It's a story that rejects reward religion. It rejects the heresy that God loves some people more than others because they are more religious than the rest of us or because they have earned God's love in some other way. Too many people still think of religion as something to be done to earn God's favor.

Life is unfair. The good news is that God loves us equally in spite of life's unfairness. We don't need to compare ourselves with others. God doesn't.

From our point of view, God's grace is not fair. Thank God it isn't. In a sermon some years ago, I said that I had been asking people, "Do you think life is unfair?" Everyone I asked answered, "yes." Then I asked, "Would you want to live in a world that was completely one-hundred percent fair so that you got everything you deserved?" And everyone answered, "no."

Earlier in this sermon, I told you about Gerald, whose wife, mother, and four-year-old daughter were all killed in an auto accident. It convinced him that life is unfair. But the more he thought about it, the more he began to be bothered by the assumption that he had a right to complete fairness. He said, "Granted, I did not deserve to lose three members of my family. But then again, I am not sure I deserved them in the first place. Lynda was a woman of superior qualities, and she loved me through some very hard times. My mother lived well and served people to her life's end, and she showed a rare sensitivity to me during my rebellious teenage years. Diana Jane, my four-year-old daughter, sparkled with enthusiasm for life and helped to fill our home with noise and excitement. Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths, but I did not deserve their presence in my life either."

He went on to say, "Living in a perfectly fair world appeals to me. But deeper reflection makes me wonder. In such a world, I might never experience tragedy, but neither would I experience grace, especially the grace God gave me in the form of three wonderful people whom I lost."

Gerald concluded that to live in a world with God's grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world might make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We might get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would be satisfied. A world with God's grace will give us more than we deserve. Amen.