



**Proper 25, Year A – September 18, 2011**  
Matthew 20.1-16 & Exodus 16.2-15

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston**

Imagine if you will a large family gathering. Surrounding you are great Aunt Hilda, that slightly crazy cousin from somewhere in upstate New York and gaggles and the giggles of children. It seems that they multiply from year to year – in a similar way to those annoying dust bunnies found in the darkest nooks in your home. You can't keep track of who belongs to whom and smile pleasantly as each person in turn tells you about the perfection of their newest bundle of joy. The children play and laugh, hesitantly at first but eventually, a bit later in the day, they find their stride and begin truly enjoying themselves.

The noise is at a fever pitch when the call for dinner comes. Running and rolling switch to mom's wiping their children's dirty faces with the dreaded "spit on the thumb". You are settled, enjoying being in the midst of such youthful energy and the food is being served when you hear the most common words, the generationally repeated three word phrase spoken by every child ever born of a woman - "that's not fair".

That's not fair. We'd like to think that the most common three word phrase is "I love you" but alas, that is seldom the case. Children are born with an innate sense of fairness and equality and when that absolute wisdom is compromised children cry out at the injustice at it all. He got more pie. She took the last burger with cheese. His ice-cream cone is bigger than mine. That's not fair. We hold that initial sense of equality and fairness throughout our lives but we learn to not repeat the phrase out loud. We no longer say it because the glib answer that is usually given is "life's not fair". I, for instance, struggle with people who are born beautiful AND brilliant and if they're really nice on top of that I choke on my envy. Why do I have to work so hard when they make life look so easy? Why did they get all the breaks when I struggle for every reward?

Once we've moved from childhood, and stopped speaking out about the personal "that's not fair"-ness that innate sense of justice for all kicks in and can make huge changes in our world. Someone, many years ago, decided that it wasn't fair that certain people had to sit at the back of the bus, and North America began a profound change in its thinking. Someone, more recently, decided that it wasn't fair that our veterans who gave their time and risked their lives came back to Canada to too little support and end up living on the street so a whole new housing initiative is in the works. Someone, some one hundred years ago, decided that it wasn't fair that women had no say in politics or decision making and here we are today lining up at the polls to elect the government that we want.

So thanks be to God for our inborn sense of fairness. But fair does not necessarily mean equal and satisfaction with what you've been given rather than focussing on what you have not may be as easy as remaining present in God's grace. Remembering today's Gospel reading from Matthew, take a moment and consider which character you might be in this story. Are you the fit and healthy worker, chosen at the beginning of the day, one who has a chance to make a full day's wage? Or are you the worker who, day after day, waits for someone to choose you so that you might have daily bread to feed your family? Or, are you the landowner, the one who sees fit to pay the last first and the first last, all in equal measure for unequal work? It's unsettling somehow to hear how those who began work towards the setting of the sun were paid the same daily wage as those who began their toil

as the light began to fill the sky hours earlier. It gnaws at our sense of fairness and justice. Her ice cream cone is bigger than mine...

And of course in the first reading from Exodus we have the whining, ungrateful followers of Moses saying that they would have been better off in slavery than hungry in the wilderness! For them, they were looking sideways, with envy, back at the people of Egypt who had enslaved them. For years they had been part of a society which hoarded food – that filled their storehouses against impending doom, doling it out as necessary. And now, according to Moses, God will give them only enough food for each day; there will be nothing to be stored. God is shaping them into a new way of thinking, into a new way of being – a way of being dependant on God for their daily bread and away from the stores going to only the elite. In this story of Exodus we hear that God is offering them Sabbath – a full day of rest to loosen them from the ties that bound them to acting only as machines for the good of Pharaoh. God says to the Israelites, I will give you what you need, when you need it and to honour yourselves and to honour me, you will rest on the Sabbath day.

We must consider that may be the Israelites were not merely whining ungrateful travellers testing the patience of their God. They were looking back to the predictable way of life in slavery with a sense of longing – at least there they could be reasonable assured of a meal to sustain them. In this passage, God acknowledges not only the Israelites' need for assurance but also God's desire to shape them as a different kind of people, a different kind of community. In the ritual practice of daily gathering of food that falls from the sky, they will learn, with their very bodies, to come to trust their god; they will learn to share their basic human resources equitably.

But then as we move back to the reading in Matthew we remember that God's answer is that equitable distribution of resources does not necessarily mean the same size ice cream cone for all. Equitable does not necessarily mean equal but it should mean enough. It was indeed a gift of God's grace that the men who longingly watched in the morning as everyone else was chosen to earn their daily bread had the chance so late in the day to receive – to receive, enough. To those who had toiled since the break of day those men chosen last received more than their fair share, but that's the point. It is not for us to judge. It is not for us to look with envy upon those who have more, or different, or other.

Our task for this week, for those days between the Sabbath, is to be satisfied with what you have, whatever that might be. That might mean being present in your work and not wishing you were home. That might mean being grateful for the family you have rather than yearning for one more perfect. That might mean not hungering for more than you have and being thankful for what you do have, whatever that might be.

So be present. Be mindful. Be grateful for whatever you have and wherever you have rather than looking back to the past with a longing heart or wishing away your present by yearning for not yet future. Somebody else might have a larger ice cream cone or a bigger slice of pie but you, you my friend, have God's grace. And for that, thanks be to God.