



Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 20, 2020

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude “We’ve Come This Far by Faith”

We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord, trusting in his holy Word—he’s never failed us yet. Oh, can’t turn around, we’ve come this far by faith. Don’t be discouraged with trouble in your life; he’ll bear your burdens and move all misery and strife. That’s why...

Gathering

Welcome and Lighting the Christ Candle

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

* Liturgist: Give praise to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done.

All: Sing of the Lord, sing his praises; tell of all his wonderful acts.

Liturgist: Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Psalm 105: 1-4

All Singing: 515 “Sing to the Lord, Sing His Praise”
Singing verses 1, 2, 4-6

Minister: To God’s people gathered in hope: Grace to you, mercy and peace, from God our Creator and Christ our Redeemer, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Passing the Peace at a Distance

Reconciliation

Liturgist: Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgements he pronounced, you his chosen ones, the children of Jacob.

All: He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth.

Liturgist: He remembers his covenant forever, the promise he made, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac.
Psalm 105: 4-8

Silent confession and reflection

Liturgist: In that covenant confidence we are bold to pray:

All: Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

Liturgist: We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

All: In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Liturgist: Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Romans 5: 1-2 NRSV

* **All Singing: 696 “Marvelous Grace”**

Liturgist: Galatians 5: 13-15, 22-26

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Proclamation

All: 396 “For the Fruit of All Creation”

Scripture: Matthew 20: 1-16

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

“About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: It’s Not Fair

* **All Singing: 689 “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy**

Dedication

Prayers of the People

* **All Singing: 927 “God the Father of Your People”**

* Benediction

Praying with Elders – If you have a concern or joy that you’d like to talk or pray about with an Elder, one or two will be available in the shade near the sanctuary entrance following the service.

Worship Leaders

Pianist/Vocalist: Dora Diephouse
Vocalist: Aron Reppmann
Percussion: Clay Carlson
Sound Engineer: Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister: Liz Hulford

9:00 AM Service

Acolyte: Reid Quist
Liturgist: Sally Larsen
Prayer: Dave Larsen
Vocalist: Jim Kwasteniet

10:15 AM Service

Acolyte: Avery Westerveld
Liturgist: Ev Bussema
Prayer: Dan Diephouse
Violin: Frances Boerman-Cornell

Hymns are from “Lift Up Your Hearts” (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013)
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Liz Hulford
Hope CRC
September 20, 2020

“It’s not fair”
Matthew 20: 1-16

“It’s not fair.” And all God’s people respond, “Life’s not fair.” Yes, you all know it. You’ve said it. You’ve said it to yourself, to your children, to your parents. It’s not fair. It, Life – the whole thing is off. The whole thing is distorted or corrupted. So we throw our hands up in the air in resignation and frustration. For who can expect fairness when the system is a sham. The therapeutic reply to the statement, “It’s not fair” is the affirmative, “No it’s not fair.” A simple recognition of a reality. And yet, this falls short. This response is enough but perhaps not “good enough.” Not good enough without further looking into what is the *it* that’s not fair, what is the fairness that we desire? Is fairness what we actually desire or is it something else? After all, if fairness is not real – what should we desire instead?

Deep within each of us is a desire for fairness. Fairness is often seen as an aspect of equality. We want life to be even, smooth and harmonious. Intellectually we know the Bible does not promise the faithful a life without problems, challenges, or hardships; and yet, because the Bible promises good, promises salvation, promises deliverance; we expect and anticipate those things for ourselves. We hope for equilibrium and equanimity. But more often than not we live our days with a sense that things are not right, are not level or stable even though they *should* be. They should be equal, things should be fair and just. Children are very good at pointing out when things are unfair. Why does she get a toy and I don’t? Why does he get to play his device longer? Why are we both punished when it’s his fault? That’s not fair! When life is unfair children often don’t know how to respond. So they respond with anger, sadness, temper tantrums and irritability. They lack the words to ask the appropriate question of “How can love allow for inequality?” Almost never is there a calm discussion of reasons for unequal distribution of assets. We model our sense of justice at a very early age from our parents. Our parents order our worlds, and that order is either repeated in the communities that we belong to, like church, school, sports, culture, or it is not. And when it is not seen, enacted or repeated we take notice. That notice may come in the form of a little ping of anxiety within ourselves. The more our anxiety is triggered the more we look for ways to protect and soothe ourselves – and often we do that by embracing our own selfishness and self-interests; thus putting us in opposition to our neighbors.

Research affirms that our desire for fairness emerges very early in our lives. The psychologists Alessandra Geraci and Luca Surian showed ten- and sixteen-month-olds puppet shows in which a lion and a bear each distributed two multicolor disks to a donkey and a cow. The lion gave each animal one disk, and the bear gave one animal two disks and other nothing. The children were then shown the lion and the bear and asked, “Which one is the good one? Please show me the good one.” The ten-month-olds chose randomly, but the sixteen-month-olds preferred the fair divider.¹ Lest you think that it was the animal that was being judged, in alternate trials the animals were switched and each time whoever gave the fair distribution of disks was judged as good. Sixteen months old and a child is able to determine fairness and equity of distribution.

This preference for fairness continues into our school years. Another study by Kristina Olson and Alex Shaw told children between the ages of six and eight a story about “Mark” and

1 Paul Bloom, *Just Babies; The Origins of Good and Evil*. Crown Publishers. New York, 2013, 61-62.

“Dan” who had cleaned up their room and were to be rewarded with erasers: They would say, “I don’t know how many erasers to give them; can you help me with that? Great. You get to decide how many erasers Mark and Dan will get. We have these five erasers. We have one for Mark, one for Dan, one for Mark and one for Dan. Uh oh. We have one left over. When the researchers asked, “Should I give [the leftover eraser] to Dan or should I throw it away? The children almost always wanted to throw it away.”²

Children desire fairness, equal distribution of assets. As we grow in life we are confronted more and more by injustice. We are led further away from seeing equality as a reality in our lives. We begin to see ourselves as arbiters of fairness. Unfortunately, fairness seems to fair when it serves our interest. Justice becomes an external concept to be distributed by those with power, like God or the legal system. Thus, we take our own inclinations towards justice and restoration out of the equation, and lose our own sense of responsibility towards fairness. Jesus repeats three times between chapters 19 and 20 that, “the last shall be first.” Clearly this is a concept that he wants the disciples and us to understand. It recognizes that there are some people who will qualify as “last” and some who will qualify as “first” but guess what, it doesn’t matter which you are. Because in God’s eyes they are the same. There is no difference between the last and the first.

I recognize that this is challenging, even to agree with Jesus regarding the categories of “last” and “first.” We would prefer to not hear this – to turn a blind eye to the injustice and reality of status. Because if we deny class or privilege we control the narrative and allow ourselves to be comfortable where we are and not work towards fairness and equality. Parables are meant to tell truths that transcend time and space. So we must consider where we show up in this passage. Do we enter into this story from a place of privilege or from a place of marginalization? There is a large cast of characters here, the wealthy landowner, the workers from the 6, 9, 12, & 3 o’clock hours, and the manager. Do we relate to the owner or to the workers? And then which set of workers? The early morning or late afternoon? As good Dutch Calvinists most of you would be the 6am or 9:00 hour workers, right? That puritanical work ethic runs deep in the blood – You work hard, all day long for your wage. Work is what is required of the faithful. God is pleased by your diligent work. Maybe even the idea if you’re on time you’re late has entered into your minds. But then maybe not, maybe you’re the worker who shows up at noon or 3:00 due to any number of circumstances. Perhaps your internal clock is off or there are other responsibilities in the day. Or perhaps you are related to the wealthy landowner who gives generously to the people. You have earned your share and are ready to give back. Let’s be honest though; the day laborers outnumber the landowners.

So Jesus says, “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” Our passage does not actually argue for a new economic system. This is not a let’s strike down capitalism moment. Although many may long for that here. We have a landowner, who agrees with the laborers to a price for a day’s pay which is a denarius. Enough pay for one day. No one working in this vineyard is able to put money aside to save up to become a landowner one day. This denarius is meant to feed a family for one day. These workers will be back in the markets tomorrow looking for more work, looking to feed their families for another day. Indeed, this landowner does nothing here to overturn the Roman system of government. He can be commended for being honest and having integrity and paying people what he said he will pay them. That’s about it. No economic structure is being built off of this passage.

And so we must take this passage at face value. The landowner, not the manager, gets up

2 Bloom, *Just Babies*, 61-62.

early to bring people to the vineyard. We are not certain of the landowner's motives. Perhaps he went to the market so many times because he needed so many people. There could have been a large crop to be harvested. Perhaps he knew the struggles of the poor and needy around him and was moved with compassion to help people earn the pay they needed to feed their families. This wealthy man, of a higher social class than those he's there to meet, does not judge the people in the market, no matter the hour. Well, he does take a moment to make sure he's not going to be duped when he asks at 3:00pm why they have been standing there all day. But he accepts their answer. He takes it at face value. "No one has hired you. Okay you go." The landowner does not put morality on trial here. He does not ask them to justify their position. He does not call them lazy, though some translations use the word idle. Instead, he lets them speak and moves on. The landowner then gets in hot water with his workers when he pays them all the same for the whole day. We might also wonder if this landowner is just bad at business. For it is not good business practice to pay everyone the same regardless of work done.

But we must not forget, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is like a landowner...." The kingdom of God is like a landowner. Bad at business? Seeing need. Hiring many. If anything, we have here an economics of fairness. It is similar to blind justice. There is a need and God responds. It is often hard when we enter into these parables to remember that God has a heart for the poor and the marginalized. That God is with the people in the marketplace waiting to be hired. God is with the first hired and the last. In God's economy someone who works one hour still needs the 100% of the daily cost of living. People still need to be paid. People still need to feed their families. We often see this parable through the lens of Equal Opportunity – everyone is afforded the opportunity to work. There is enough labor to go around. But the more accurate title to this parable may be The Affirmative Action Parable – the workers are selected based off of their need. They are there, they have needs and they are chosen to participate. They are paid based on need and not work. The kingdom of God loves the poor, seeks out the poor to be comforted, to receive the mercy of God and to receive it first.

If we enter into this passage from a place of privilege we often relate to the landowner or the first hired who complain. The idea of merit, a meritocracy, where we get what we deserve because we earn, because we work, because we struggle is difficult. It is hard to separate ourselves from the idea that work means reward. We are rewarded with pay for our work. You put in the effort and you should get paid a fair wage. But what if pay is not the reward for labor. What if there is no real reward for labor. The Swiss theologian and economist Ina Praetorius wrote recently about how women bear the brunt of the economic system, often providing hours of labor for free or for minimum wages. She tells the story of a Swiss public TV broadcast report about nursing expenses for the elderly. An old handicapped man sitting in a wheelchair was interviewed. He proudly told us how he was still able to live in his own apartment, saving thousands of Swiss Francs that other elderly people living in nursing homes receive as subsidies from the state. Just one tiny comment from a voice from on set explained the miracle: "His wife is caring for him, especially during the night."³

Work without pay still happens. It happens regularly for many women throughout the world. Often titled "emotional labor" – it is emotional but also physical toil. This toil, labor, enables the world to go around and flow with minimal interruptions. Inequality is all around us still to this day. The reality is that the ones who merit – the strong, the agile, the able – they probably did get chosen first. They merited their daily salary because they did earn it. Those who

3 <https://creativeconfusionblog.wordpress.com/2020/09/11/money-a-helpful-instrument-to-make-the-world-a-better-place-for-all/>

arrived later were probably the sick, the invalid. Though sometimes we do read into this story the idea that the people were “idle – i.e. lazy – the sin of sloth.” The reality is that day laborers are known to go from job site to job site. It is entirely possible that these laborers were at a different field earlier in the day or doing some other task before they arrived to be picked from the market. It was not uncommon in the Roman period for people to work many different jobs in a day, as many low-income families do today – just to get by.

So the ones who arrive first probably do have a claim to unfairness and injustice because they only make what they make. They agreed to a certain wage and were paid for it. Unfortunately for them, that wage was offered to others later in the day as well. I’m reminded here of the quote, “When you are accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.” Those who have privilege often have to give up their privileges to accommodate or even include those who are less fortunate into the equation. This can feel like a painful process. It can be painful to allow for justice and to see the world through the eyes of those less fortunate. This different model here of labor, of payment, challenges us to understand the Kingdom of God and ourselves differently. The Kingdom of God may propose an alternate version of work. That work is not about merit. Supply and demand can often breed exploitation. Those on the margins – the poor, the needy, the immigrant are used and discarded more often than we realize. Work is also about fulfillment. Fulfillment of our needs for identity, purpose, meaning, and connection. Work has spiritual elements to it. Yes, manual labor is hard and it deserves a fair wage. But wages may not be the goal. The Kingdom of God may not be about wage, it may be about so much more.

We traditionally feel that Jesus is saying to us, with everything that he says, “Go and do likewise.” But this is a parable of the Kingdom. It is not an economics lesson. God is not asking us to reform the economics of the world, sorry to anyone looking for a socialist justification. Instead we are to look in this passage to what God does, what the landowner does. And this is model generosity. Just like the Kingdom of God. Generosity is not equality, it is not fairness. It does not demand a response. Generosity is not measurable, accountable, or calculable. Generosity is Grace. Jesus is saying, the landowner, the Kingdom of God is well within its rights to be fair and imbalanced. That generosity sees need and offers care. Do we begrudge those who complained and say, “Oh well they’re brats, they got paid end of story? Do we begrudge God? It is fair to ask ourselves, “Have we begrudged generosity offered to others?” Have we thought – that’s not fair.

I find in my work that people, women, struggle with the idea of justice and forgiveness. They cannot forgive themselves for what they have done to their bodies, to themselves or what others have done to them. Therefore they cannot live in grace. They do not love themselves, so it becomes infinitely difficult to love others or recognize the love of God extended to them. They have a hard time understanding that justice calculates. Justice adds up wrongs and demands a response. Love let’s go. Love is about relationship. Love cares for the latecomer as well as the first arriver. There is no difference between one and the other. Both need pay, both need to feed their families, both want harmony, peace, and both deserve it.

True generosity does not have strings attached. The love of God does not have strings attached. It is not about merit. There is nothing that you can do to earn your salvation. You work in this life. Yes, you work hard for your salaries for what you have and yet that hard work is not what God cares about. The hard work you perform fulfills you and your families, it does not make God love you more. That can be shocking to realize. That what we do does not move the heart of God, at least not in the direction of more love. It is also shocking to realize that God loves you and your neighbor the same. Matthew Skinner has written, “So excessive is God’

propensity to give and care, it violates our instincts about fairness.” We cannot comprehend this abounding love so much that it blows our minds or compels us to reject it. We think it cannot be true that God loves the homeless on the street as much as I who attend church regularly. Or that God loves the abuser and the abused. Ultimately, the complaint of the laborers is that the landowner has made those who came last equal to the first. This is a struggle that we are engaging in in our own country now. How can we be equal across race, gender, orientation, economic and cultural lines? The landowner, the Kingdom of God has the answer – just give. Give generously. Cast out our thoughts of merit and worthiness. Look to the humanity and love for inspiration. We are one in God’s sight. The Kingdom of God makes us all one.

Many women of Hope engaged in Bible Study this summer of Be the Bridge by Latasha Morrison. In the session that I led we began by affirming the statement that God loves everyone. If we do not begin with this place, that God is a God of love and loves everyone across all boundaries, we miss out. We miss the mark of the Kingdom of God. We begrudge grace and mercy, we fail to see need and humanness in our neighbors. The laborers of the morning and the afternoon are equal, both deserving of generosity and love. No matter what our self-image and propensity towards self-interest. God’s interests go so much deeper than our own understandings. So yes, “It’s not fair” and all God’s people say, “Life’s not fair” and the Kingdom of God is not fair but it is just, loving, grace-filled and generous. Thanks be to God that the Kingdom of God is here, now, for you, for me, for all of us. Amen.