

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT  
on September 20, 2020 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Proper 20 (A) Jonah 3:10-4:11. Psalm 145: 1-8. Philippians 1:21-30. Matthew 20:1-16

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Do you ever get upset because life does not seem fair? We are living in a season when people all across our nation are angry because they don't think life in America is fair.

Some of us don't think it is fair that we are required to wear masks. Others think it is not fair that some people refuse to wear masks.

Many people on the lower end of the pay scale say, it's not fair that we have to work two and three jobs and still can't support our family because we can only get part time work which does not pay an adequate wage or provide health insurance or sick time benefits.

Many employers say, it's not fair to criticize us for not paying higher wages or health insurance and benefits because if we do, we can't make enough profit to support our business.

Many people are saying, it's not fair that black, brown, and native people are arrested, jailed, shot and killed at a higher rate than others in society, when most of the time they are just going about their business and not trying to hurt anyone.

Others respond, it's not fair to criticize our police. They have a very difficult job to do in a violent society and we need to support them as they risk their lives to protect us and uphold our laws.

Right now, we are a nation divided over our opposing convictions of what we think is right and fair and just.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells a very uncomfortable and challenging parable about how God's view of what is fair and just is often very different from our human thoughts of what is fair and just. If Jesus was here preaching on this parable right now, I wonder what he would say to us as individuals and as a nation? I'm sure he would push me and all of us outside our comfort zones, just like he did when he first told this parable.

Let me begin by saying that I have no simple answers for us as we ponder this parable. It is tempting to just avoid or reject Scripture passages that upset us. But let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us go deeper than our initial reaction and explore what Jesus might be trying to communicate to us about how God's perspective on what is fair and just is often different than our normal human perspectives.

This parable revolves around two kinds of people. The first is the owner of a vineyard, a wealthy businessman, near the top of the social/economic ladder. The other characters are day laborers. They are near the bottom of the social/economic ladder. They may have a couple of chickens and a small garden, but they don't own any land. They don't have a regular trade, so they go into town every morning hoping they can find work so they can feed their families. They are not beggars. They want to work, but they live on the edge of survival economically.

As the story begins, the vineyard owner goes into town before six am because it is harvest time and he needs to hire some day laborers to pick his grapes for making wine. He agrees to pay them the

going daily wage of one denarius. That was about the amount of money required to feed a family for a day. So, both the owner and the workers are happy with the contract.

As the morning work progresses, the owner goes back into town at nine a.m. and sees more workers waiting to be hired, so he hires more and sends them into his vineyard. He tells them he'll pay them what is right. While he never defines what that wage will be, they trust him and go to work in the vineyard. Around noon and then around three the owner makes return trips into the town and hires more workers. One last time, around five o'clock, knowing that there is only one hour left in the workday, the owner goes into town and again sees workers still waiting to be hired, so he hires them to work in his vineyard.

At six p.m., the workday ends. The owner tells his vineyard manager to settle accounts with all the workers. The ones who came last and worked only one hour were paid first. They expected very little, but to their shock and delight, they received a denarius, as if they had worked a full twelve-hour day. Those hired at three, twelve and nine received the same denarius, as if they worked the whole day.

Seeing all this, those who began work at six am probably began to get excited, wondering how much **more** they would get paid for working a full day. But when their turn came to be paid, the manager gave them a single denarius, just as every other worker had been paid. Of course, they began to grumble and complain to the owner. "These last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who worked a full 12-hour day, through the scorching heat! We deserve to be paid more for working harder and longer!"

We can feel why they were angry. We'd be angry too if we were in their position. It doesn't seem fair or just! Yet, look how the owner of the vineyard responds. He says, 'Friend, I'm doing you no wrong. I'm paying you exactly what we agreed to. If I want to pay someone else more, what is that to you? Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?' Then the owner pushes the issue even further. "Are you envious because I am generous?"

How do you feel about owners response? Of course, the owner is technically right in his observations. But it still bothers us. Everything we know about life says it isn't fair or just. Those who worked the longest and hardest deserve more.

Of course, how we respond to the story depends on which group we identify with. If we identify with the ones who worked the longest, we feel resentful. But if we identify with the ones who worked for one hour, we'd be filled with gratitude.

In this story is Jesus inviting us to wonder if perhaps what we think is fair and just about life in this world, is different from the way God sees things? At the beginning of the parable Jesus says he is telling us about what things are like in God's kingdom. Is he implying that when people live with love for God and all their neighbors, we will live by a different value system than most of humanity? In the story, everyone is treated with the same dignity, respect and reward, according to what they need, regardless of what they have contributed.

Notice the response of the owner after the laborers who worked twelve hours complained about how unfair their wages were compared to those who worked only one hour. The owner responds by saying, "Friend". This was a very counter cultural response. After all, the owner was wealthy, he had power and status in that society. The day laborers were near the lowest rung of the socio-economic

ladder. Wealthy people treated them like animals, like property, like worthless nobodies. But not this wealthy vineyard owner. He spoke to the poorest people as equals, respectfully and affectionately calling them his friends. He honored their complaint and invited them to take a larger perspective of what is fair and just for everyone.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread. Perhaps Jesus is reminding his hearers and us that the people who worked only one hour still had a family to feed that night. We don't know why they were not given jobs earlier. Were they older, or weaker or handicapped or of a different race? Regardless of why they were not given work earlier, the owner provided all the workers with enough to feed their families. He did not give them more than they needed. How much more do we need than enough? Is Jesus saying that in God's Kingdom, we will not be in competition to get more rewards than our neighbors; instead, we will have God's sense of what is fair and just and be eager to see God's loving generosity shared equally with every person God created? That we will see all our neighbors as friends of God and our friends, worthy of our love and respect and support?

As I said, there are no easy answers to how Jesus wants us to understand and apply today's parable. Jesus does make it very clear that God has a different perspective on what is fair and just than we human beings usually have. For 2,000 years every generation of Christians has had to prayerfully struggle with how this parable applies to their situation. This week, I hope you will take time to think and pray about this parable every day this week. What might Jesus want us to think and do differently as a result of listening to this parable?

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment. In your imagination, be aware that Jesus is sitting near you, right where you are. Reflect on this parable with Jesus.

How do you think the Jesus way of love reflected in this parable is different from the values of what is fair and right and just that drive our American society?...

How is the perspective of Jesus in this parable different from the way you and I think, speak and act?...

As a result of pondering this parable, what changes might Jesus be inviting you and me to make in the way we think, speak and act this week?...

O Gracious God, thank you for loving all of us and everyone on this planet with the same kind of extravagant love that the vineyard owner showed for all the people who worked in his vineyard. Help us, give us the mind and heart of Christ this week, so we can think, speak and act more like that generous and loving owner, more like you, our Beloved Creator and Friend. Amen.