

“It’s not fair!” my four year old complained. “Why do you get two pieces of bread and I get only one?!?” I picked up the roll, broke it in two like I had mine just moments before, and set both halves on the plate. My child smiled and said smugly, “that’s better, Mama.”

Kids begin to develop their sense of fairness at an early age, and they are quite vocal when they perceive injustice. Having been a parent for a little while now, I have it on good authority that it’s not fair that children have to do chores. And I’ve been informed that it’s not fair that someone is expected to take a bath when they are dirty, or have to tie their own shoes, or carry their own backpack from the bus stop.

And as they’ve grown up, I’ve noticed a shift in how they understand fairness. It’s no longer primarily about feeling burdened by undesirable tasks ~ it has become more about inequality. It’s not fair that a sibling got two more French fries in their Happy Meal, or more time on the upstairs TV. It’s not fair that they have an earlier bedtime than adults, that she gets more new shoes (despite having feet that grow amazingly fast!), or that he got an extra marshmallow at dessert. It’s as though they understand sameness to mean justice.

Themes about our innate human desire for fairness and our limited understanding of justice are teased out in our lessons this morning. And we see that these can collide with God’s penchant for grace and mercy. Let’s begin with the Gospel.

The employment of day laborers was a common practice in first century Palestine. Generally speaking, day laborers were worse off than slaves: keep in mind that a slave owner must make a long-term investment in their slaves in order to get the best return – provide room and board, clothe them, provide appropriate medical care when they got sick or

wounded, and train them to perform needed and sometimes highly skilled jobs (think Joseph in Egypt from last Sunday's reading).

There was no such commitment to day laborers. These individuals had no access to land, had no accumulated or inherited wealth with which to purchase land, and were dependent on the seasons, the viability of crops, and their own physical ability to perform the desired work. Those who lived in these margins did so involuntarily, rendered powerless by socio-economic and political forces beyond their control. They performed work despised by others ... but only when they were lucky enough to find it. These individuals were often destitute and frequently dependent on alms. They included the likes of women without familial support, those who were in poor health, individuals who had been injured or become physically handicapped, criminals, and prostitutes. They were the ones their society deemed expendable.¹

Landowners, however, were positioned at the opposite end of the social spectrum. Vineyards and livestock required capital investment usually procured through inheritance of great wealth. A vineyard owner didn't have to worry about balancing the books day in and day out, or even year in and year out. He had enough resources to wait out droughts and poor harvests until his land produced an abundance of high quality crops.²

According to the Law, day laborers were to be paid their wages by sunset, "because [Deuteronomy tells us] they are poor and their livelihood depends on them."³ So what the landowner does in Jesus' parable is certainly not normal practice.

We are presented with a scenario in which the laborers expect differences in pay depending on seniority in the vineyard. But the

¹ The Rev. Christopher Burkett

² In contrast, peasant farmers, what we might consider the middle class, just managed to eke out a living from one harvest to the next.

³ Deut 24:14-15

landowner not only refuses to use wages to reinforce distinctions among his crew, he brings attention to his radical egalitarian mindset by paying the most recent hires first. Despite being the one who would lose the most by treating his employees graciously, he consciously chooses to even out the playing field, assuring his hires and their families would not go to sleep hungry that night.

This is not the world as we so easily accept it today and it is not the world as Jesus and his disciples experienced it, either. The world of this parable is one in which the marginalized are respected and validated for their contribution to their community ... regardless of how large or small that contribution was. The one in authority and power has chosen not to dominate or marginalize. The one in authority and power isn't looking out for Number One, but rather transforming culturally accepted systemic oppression into a radical, mercy-filled egalitarianism.

Not unlike the indignation of those who worked a full day for the same wages as those who arrived later, we read in our Old Testament lesson about Jonah's intense anger that the one in power, God, has chosen to deal generously with the Ninevites, whom Jonah deems as expendable. Jonah is fuming mad that God would be true to God's character ~ which *he himself* describes as "gracious ... and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."⁴ Jonah was so resentful of God's abiding love for an unworthy people that he tried (however unsuccessfully) to run away from his calling, and moaned and groaned and grumbled against God's judgement.

Yet God reminds Jonah, again and again as he continued to display hard-heartedness and falsely-placed righteous indignation, that God can *and will* do as God sees fit. God demonstrates that our desire for fairness and need for justice are not always aligned with God's intention for us. And it doesn't really matter if we think it's fair or not. God's divine right is to be merciful and treat people with justice and loving-kindness,

⁴ Jonah 4:2b

whether they deserve it or not. Just like the landowner does for the late hires. Just as God did for the Ninevites. Just as God did for Jonah. Just as God does for you and for me.

And it's not fair. It is blessedly, mercifully *not fair*. And thank God for it! Because it means that you and I and Jonah and all the other misfits and know-it-alls, and childish, tantrum-throwing numbskulls ... **all** have a place at God's Table, despite our hard hearts, our short-sightedness, our own petulant grievances. Same goes for those who have been laid off, who work 60 hours a week at minimum wage, or who quietly do their part without any thanks or recognition. They, too, of course have a seat at God's Table as well.

We cannot earn what God gives. Nor can anyone else. In the household of God, there is no pecking order, there is no insider or outsider, there is no one who wields power and authority over another, and no one is expendable.

So if our baptismal call is to build God's Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven, how do we do that? How do we reorient the systems that are in place so that there is no insider and outsider, so that there is no one who wields power and authority over another, so that no one is expendable?

Paul tells us. "Order your life together in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ,"⁵ Paul's instruction is not directed to individuals, but to the entire community. "Ordering a community's life together is, by definition, the work of politics."⁶ ...Paul does not tell them to adopt the politics of the Gospel of Christ, but rather that their [policies and governance] ought to be *worthy* of the Gospel of Christ. This suggests that there may be many ways to order a community's life together that would be worthy of the Gospel."⁷

⁵ Phil 1:27

⁶ *Politics* defined as the activities associated with the governance of an area

⁷ Stephen Fowl

In God's empire, we disciples should always look at social relationships and social structures from an egalitarian, mercy-oriented, grace-infused perspective. God's realm challenges our notions of hierarchy and privilege and is *most* concerned with those who are perceived to abide outside of respectable society, who are deemed most unworthy, who are treated as expendable and of no consequence.

As the body of Christ, we are blessed with a corporate authority to discern how and in what manner to embody a common life worthy of the Gospel of Christ. This is a question to which our community has been called to respond, and one from which we must not try to run and hide, to moan and groan and grumble like Jonah: in a time of racial unrest, in the midst of pandemic and environmental crisis, during a period of economic uncertainty, at a time of contentious national and international power politics, how might *we* order our life together in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, where the last have a shot at being first and the first are willing to come in last?