

MARCH 5, 2023 - LENT 2

Matthew 20:1-16 (Love or Justice?)

Given the choice, which would you choose, justice or love? Not an easy choice as both are important marks of Christian communities. So, I would expect that we would want both - justice and love. Yet sometimes, we are forced to make a choice, a difficult choice. That may well be part of the message in this parable.

Put yourself in the sandals of the workers who were chosen last. You have all but given up hope for work that day and would soon make the long and disappointing trek home. After all, you aren't trying to make a little bit of extra spending money. You're a simple labourer, who can expect to earn no more than a daily wage - just barely enough to support yourself and your family for one more day. What may be considered food insecurity for some is the norm for you. Just imagine the excitement when you are finally invited to join the other labourers late in the day. It may not be a full day's wage, but enough to scrape by. Imagine your overwhelming joy when the manager unexpectedly and inexplicably pays you a full day's wage. You are overcome with emotions - relief, joy, and gratitude as you collect your pay.

Now, put yourself in the sandals of those who had been hired at the start of the day. Grateful for the work, you laboured all day, doing the

work that you had done on so many other days, not because you experience any particular pleasure from your labour, but because you have to put food on the table, an experience that is not limited to the first century.

At the end of your shift, you line up just like any other day to collect your pay. And when word travels down the line that those hired at the end of the day are getting a full day's pay, your own moment of wonder turns quickly to anticipation as you calculate what that might mean for you. It's a reasonable expectation. If those who worked only one hour received a full day's pay, then it would be reasonable to expect that those who worked all day would receive much more.

But, all that anticipation turns to dust in your mouth when the manager gives you the same pay - a day's wage. This seems so totally unfair - you have after all, worked ten times longer than those other, last-hour workers. And resentment, rather than gratitude grabs hold of you. Sensing all the grumbling, the owner of the vineyard protests, that he actually *has* treated you fairly, paying exactly what was contracted, and wonders why you begrudge his generosity to others.

It's all too easy for us to dismiss these labourers as ungrateful or selfish, or to borrow a biblical phrase, hard of heart. But, their

reaction is probably what most of us would have felt if we had been the day-long labourers. What happened to them simply does not make sense, and definitely is unfair. It doesn't matter that this is what was contracted. If those who worked for an hour received a day's pay, then those who worked so much longer deserve more. So, if forced to choose, which would you take - love or justice?

On the surface, this parable is about generosity. But, every act of generosity is simultaneously an act of love. This brings a clash between generosity and justice to the forefront. These workers want justice. Can anyone blame them? They feel cheated because they calculated their wages relative to what the manager paid the latecomers. And that's what justice does: it counts and measures and calculates because justice is a matter of law and seeks to ensure that all people receive equal treatment, equal opportunity, and equal standing, which is why justice is so very important to us.

But, the vineyard owner responds that he has acted not with justice in mind, but rather with love expressed through generosity. And when justice and love clash, it can get ugly, because where justice counts or keeps tabs, love loses track. Where justice calculates, love lets go. Where justice holds all things in the balance, love and generosity give everything away, upsetting the balances we have so carefully arranged.

However, love is not the opposite of justice - far from it! Nor does love permit or encourage injustice. Rather, love passes beyond the realm of justice and into the realm of relationship. Now consider what it would be like to determine your relationships primarily by the law of justice, counting up every slight or injury done to you by your partner so that you could do the same to him or her; keeping track of every time your child or parent disappoints you so you can hand them the tally at the end of the day; logging every hurt you experience at the hands of those around you so that you can remember, keeping a record of your grievances and waiting for amends?

Can you imagine living your life this way? It would be hell on earth. While justice makes room for relationships, it's love, generosity, and forgiveness that enable relationships to flourish.

So, this hypothetical choice between love and justice is not hypothetical after all. We make this choice every day - when we forget all the times a colleague has been helpful - and obsess about a perceived slight, or when we overlook all those who drive with consideration for others, yet are driven to anger and frustration by the driver who cuts us off, or when you overlook the thousand kindnesses a partner or friend has performed on your behalf but nurse a grudge about the one thing he or she did to hurt your

feelings.

At each of these turns you can choose: will you call for justice or will you live out of generosity and love? Put this way, you want to live out of love. But, that's hard, very hard. We seem to be hardwired to count our hurts and disappointments rather than our blessings. Perhaps it was evolution's way of teaching us to avoid threats. But, at the end of the day, it's much easier to live by counting, by keeping score, rather than by grace.

Acknowledging the fact that while we want to choose love, yet often end up calling for justice, perhaps noting God's choices just might make it easier for us to make our choices. And that may be why Jesus tells this parable. The primary actor in the story is the vineyard owner, the one who keeps sending for workers all day long until everyone has secured employment, the one who instructs the manager to pay generously, the one who takes the time to answer the indignant labourers, the one who always and at every possible turn chooses love over justice.

For many who hear this story, the question of injustice really grabs them. It just isn't fair. Maybe there's another way to look at this parable, as we consider the process as the vineyard owner returns to the marketplace to the waiting labourers throughout the day. Our

sense of justice might shift just a bit.

In the ancient world, day labourers would show up in the market place at sunrise each morning hoping to be hired, hoping to exchange their time and energy for a denarius, a small silver coin that was the minimum daily income needed to keep a small family fed, housed and clothed for a day.

Employers needing workers would typically go to the marketplace in the morning around six, to hire labourers for the day. Yet, this employer keeps going back to the marketplace - at nine, at noon, at three and even at five, and when he sees others standing idle, he offers them work as well. Perhaps he has an especially large harvest of grapes, or maybe he simply cannot stand to see workers standing idle knowing they have families to feed.

If we consider the first trip to the marketplace, there can be little doubt that the vineyard owner, like the other landowners would pick the strongest workers, the fastest, the fittest, possibly the most enthusiastic. They would be the workers that he knew would work hard all day and give the best results.

When he returns for his next trip to hire more workers, once again he would choose the best of those who were left waiting to join his

other workers. And so on through the day until he comes for the final time.

Imagine those who might be left at this point: maybe the elderly, the infirm, the inexperienced, those who have an injury or disability; people who would possibly not have survived the whole day in the field, in the hot sun. Yet, these people still have the same needs, desires and aspirations as those chosen earlier in the day: to provide for their family, to have a sense of worth, to build some financial security.

The Bible consistently witnesses to God's concern for the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the orphan, the widow, the resident alien. Scripture also has some pretty harsh words for those who trample the poor and vulnerable for their own gain.

Yet, the randomness of life denies them the opportunity to work the full day to be as successful. For many the burdens they already carry are work in themselves. The generosity of the vineyard owner in this case shifts our thinking away from what a person can achieve or offer, to the way in which a person and their very life is valued by the vineyard owner. He wants to give value and opportunity for life to even the weakest within the community of workers!

There is no question that God cares about justice. Yet in this parable we learn that God does not operate according to our standards of fairness. This parable contradicts so many of our assumptions about the world. In most areas of our lives, we are taught that we get what we deserve. If we follow the rules and work hard, we should get ahead. We should get the good grade, the promotion, or the raise. We should receive recognitions for our years of loyal service. Those who are idle or lazy should not expect to receive the same rewards.

The vineyard owner blows apart our mentality of “deserving”. It is not about what we deserve, or think we deserve, based on what we do or do not put in. The emphasis of the parable is on the generosity of the vineyard owner who pays all labourers what they need to provide for their families, no matter how many hours they have worked.

This parable calls into question the way our world operates and how it devalues people and exploits many who work long hours in appalling conditions so those in wealthier countries can have cheap products. It may feel unfair for those who already have access to wealth and opportunity because of their skills, like the labourers who were chosen first. The reality is that life itself has been unjust in different ways to those who are chosen last.

Maybe this is what Jesus is trying to help us realize: that the good

news is not just for the privileged few, but for all, and that as many times as it takes, God will return seeking us out to join in the labour.

The kingdom of heaven is like this: God seeks us all out and all are rewarded, all are given the dignity of work, all are rewarded with life and hope; rewarded with a future; rewarded for a great effort or a little labour at the eleventh hour.

This is a parable about the kingdom of God. And God, it turns out, is not fair. God does not play by our rules. God does not give us what we deserve. And thank God for that! For if each of us got exactly what we deserved, where would we be? In fact, God lavishes grace and mercy on all of us, no matter how late we have come to the vineyard.

We know God cares about justice. The law, prophets, and Jesus' own life and ministry testify to that. But, in the end, justice can only make things better. It's love that saves, and so when forced to choose - between exercising God's just judgment against us or forgiving and accepting us in love - God, in Jesus and his cross and resurrection, chooses love.

Certainly God cares about fairness in our human economy and marketplaces. God calls us to work for justice, so that all can receive

a livable wage and daily bread, so that all can have a roof over their heads. At the same time, God's economy, the economy of the kingdom, goes way beyond fairness. There is nothing to be earned in God's economy. There is only God's generosity freely spent - on us.

No matter how much we identify with those who worked all day, in the end we realize that we are all latecomers, those who had no good reason to expect such lavish, even reckless generosity. This is the God we discover in Jesus, the God who looks at us in love, overlooking all those places we fall short, and chooses to treat us with unmerited grace, mercy, and generosity.

Just as we receive our physical life and all that sustains it as a gift from God, so too our spiritual life. The parable of the vineyard workers is followed by Jesus telling his disciples a third time what lies ahead in Jerusalem - how he will be mocked and flogged and crucified, and on the third day be raised. There is no fairness or justice here. Certainly Jesus did not deserve this cruel suffering and death. But, the Son of Man came "not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" so that the abundance of God's unconditional love and mercy would be poured out on us. Thanks be to our God who is so unfair!

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR MARCH 5, 2023

Creator God, revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth, present to us now through your Spirit, we hear your call to care for the lost, the last, the little, and the least that even through us your grace may touch their lives. We offer thanksgiving for God's presence with us and petitions for the transformation of the church and the world, saying:
God of love ... **Shine your light into the darkness.**

Loving God, friend of outcast and stranger prejudiced in favour of those whom others reject, we hear your call to care for those on the margins of our world; Aboriginal sisters and brothers lost in their own land, refugees seeking asylum and new hope, those excluded from our communities. May our ministry offer dignity and respect to each and every person and offer a place of welcome at the table for the stranger and the outcast.

God of love ... **Shine your light into the darkness.**

Gracious God, relating to us as a generous parent offering yourself in love to every person, we hear your call to offer hope of renewed relationships where trust and love have been displaced by fear and jealousy, where family has become a place of abuse rather than nurture, where hurts, real or imagined, remain unforgiven. May our ministry offer your gifts of grace and reconciliation and hold out the hope of restored and renewed human relationships.

God of love ... **Shine your light into the darkness.**

Living God known to us in the dance of community we call Trinity, mediated to us through the common life of the church, we hear your call to offer new communities of meaning and hope to those who live in isolation and emptiness; to those whose lives lack purpose and direction; to those seeking a safe place to nurture their journey of spirit. May our ministry offer the hope of deep and trusted friendship and a way to find connectedness with those with whom we share the journey of life.

God of love ... **Shine your light into the darkness.**

God beyond all names whose presence lives in those you call by name, whose presence goes before us into the lives of those to whom we minister, we hear your call to serve in a variety of places. We pray that each one of us, as we serve you in our particular ministry, may find renewed depth in our relationship with you, may be confirmed in our call to this ministry, may find our gifts and call affirmed as we offer them in service, may become a part of a healthy and life-giving community of faith.

God of love ... **Shine your light into the darkness.**

Compassionate God, we trust in your presence in the places where beauty and new life is not easily seen. We pray for those mourning loss in the deadly train crash in Greece; for those caught in the long fraught and new waves of turmoil in the West Bank of Palestine; for those affected by the continued loss and political gridlock of war in Ukraine; for lives lost and upended by the earthquake in Turkey and Syria; for the girls poisoned in schools in Iran to prevent their education.

God of love ... **Shine your light into the darkness.**

God in whose eyes all are loved equally, we pray for all women as we celebrate the International Women's Day: for women living in poverty where 70% of 1.3 billion people living in poverty are women, and in urban areas where 40% of the poorest households are headed by women. We pray that women have control over their reproductive decisions; that they be protected against violence and abuse and not be sold into the sex trade. We pray for the end of patriarchy and ask that all girls and women be given equal opportunities for education and employment.

God of love ... **Shine your light into the darkness.**

For all the blessings of this life we offer thanks. Help us to have generous hearts and giving spirits. Help us to be your hands in the world. Hear these our prayers as we offer them in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray ...

Our Father