

The Rev. Anne Turner
Proper 20 A (Matthew 20:1-16)
September 20, 2020
Saint Thomas Church, McLean, Virginia

I love [this scene](#) because it echoes what's happening in our gospel today. Jesus is telling this story about labor and just payment to the crowds gathered around him, and they are baffled by it. And within the story, the vineyard owner is telling the workers that he is allowed to be generous, whatever they think. And they, too, are baffled. And their response is also our human response. You're getting the story wrong. This isn't fair.

We know this story. Good is rewarded. You get what you pay for. You earn what you deserve. That is what's fair. And here's what else is fair: if you work more, you get more. If you work less, you get less.

If you are not playing fair, the logic goes, you are hurting someone. And if I do the math and average out my hourly wage, I will tell you that I have been shorted. And if I am like the workers in that story—which I am—I will complain to Jesus about it.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704913704575453792265306852>

And Jesus basically says, to them and to me and to us, come down to Home Depot with me and let's talk to some of the guys hanging out there looking for work.

Have you met the guy who got the job early in the morning? He was lucky. He shares a room in an apartment close enough to the store to walk over there, and his roommate woke him up in the morning. He from the same town in El Salvador as the noon guy, but that guy had to go to the clinic this morning to try and get his diabetes treated. The 5:00 guy has diabetes, too, but he's slow because he just got the news that the gang killed his brother back home.

But fair's fair. Right?

<https://www.sfexaminer.com/entertainment/theres-more-to-dorothea-lange-than-migrant-mother/>

The more you tug at the thread of what we would call fairness, the more it all starts to unravel. Try to figure out what is fair between siblings in the heat of a fight, and you will discover this. Try to figure out what is fair over the long haul or a marriage, and you will discover this, too. Maybe it's OK that it was my turn this time because it will be your turn next time, except by next time things have changed. There's no way to do the calculus of history and expectation and attitude and perception to come up with a durable standard.

<https://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/i-am-a-man>

Try to figure out fairness in our society, and you will see just how unraveled it all is. Do we want to talk about equality of opportunity for all people? Or are we willing to talk about what is harder—equality of outcome? What does it mean for us when we say there is liberty and justice for all, but when at the same time some of us are in the school-to-prison pipeline, or face high hurdles to voting, or don't have access to well-funded public education?

We insist on equality of opportunity and can't agree on equality of outcome. Some of us have great privilege. And it makes our lives a lot easier to think that we earned it, or that we deserve it.

Here's the thing: What is fair is not necessarily the same as what is just. We made up fairness, way back in Genesis when Cain started comparing himself to Abel. But justice comes from God. Marian Budde, the bishop of Washington, has written that justice is love writ on a large scale, society's expression of God's love.

<https://www.space.com/54-earth-history-composition-and-atmosphere.html>

Jesus is not small like us. Jesus is big like God. And so Jesus is not interested in what is fair. He is interested in what is just. We keep telling Jesus that he's getting the story wrong. But Jesus refuses to stop telling that story.

We do not have time for this right now. Our world is bad off. It's not just the pandemic. It's climate change and wildfires on the west coast and hurricanes on the east. It's entrenched violence fed by systemic racism and nationalism. If you are lucky—and most of us are lucky—you have the resources to get through these things. If you are not lucky, you are one of the black or brown or poor or disabled people with fewer defenses and unhappy endings. The 5:00 workers are not just sitting idle. They are dying.

Fair can't last. But the gospel does give us some good news, because what does last is God's generosity. We are busy counting beans. But God is busy trying to love the world. No matter what jerks we are to one another, God keeps on loving us. God keeps on hankering after justice for every single one of us out there at every hour of every day.

<https://www.ft.com/content/e820b6a2-4d28-11ea-95a0-43d18ec715f5>

What does that good news mean for you? First off, if you are showing up at 5:00, you know that God loves you. God believes that you deserve to be cared for just as much as the person who was born with different skin or in a different country or with different abilities. And if you are showing up at 9:00? You are freed from the burden of believing that you only got loved because of something you did. None of us are playing a zero sum game.

For all of us: this good news is not just an announcement but an invitation. We are reminded of God's generosity. And we are invited to let that generosity make us different people because we have received it. We are invited to tell a different story--one that may not make sense to the rest of the world, at first, but one that makes sense to God. Tell about justice. Tell about

not just mercy and grace. Tell about God's love not just but what you say but by respecting the dignity of every human being. Because all of them—all of us—are in God's care, no matter where and no matter when.