

SERMON: Beyond Justice
TEXT: Matthew 20:1-16

9-20-20

“Jesus loves you! But I’m his favorite.”

No. Really. If you’ll humor me for a moment, let’s pretend that it’s not a joke.

I’ve been a full-time, ordained minister for nearly 26 years. Called by God to do God’s work and to share God’s word. On call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. This is a second career for me. Had I continued to work as an Executive Secretary or Office Manager, I would probably be making more money than I am now. Some people have told me (and I think they actually believe it) that my prayers are somehow louder than theirs, more powerful. That my prayers carry more weight. If Reverend Ellen asks for it, God is more likely to answer.

I think this makes me one of those workers who was in the field at sun-up. And the rest of you came along later in the day. Maybe you had a good reason for being late; maybe not. But, I think you’ll agree, it’s only fair that I and all my other minister friends are first in line at the end of the day **and** get the biggest paycheck. It makes perfect sense. Right? Standard hourly wage times the number of hours

worked, equals a fair wage for everyone. A four-year-old could understand this concept - it's not hard.

So, now you get it when I say, "Jesus loves you; but I'm his favorite."

Right?

Oh, wait. I just turned the tables on you, didn't I? In this scenario you're not the all-day workers that we all often identify with. Now that the shoe's on the other foot, do you feel differently? Rather than grumbling at the injustice of equal pay for unequal work, maybe you will begin to feel gratitude for a generous gift that you did not earn.

I think the reason we get so upset about this parable is because we live in a society where hard work is rewarded and there's no free lunch.

We believe in the story of the Little Red Hen who decided to plant some wheat. She asked for help from the dog, the cat, and the duck. "Not me!" they all answered. "You see, they were all quite lazy." When the wheat grew and was ready to be cut, again Little Red Hen's request for help fell on deaf ears. Then it

was time to grind the wheat and bake the bread, and she had to do it all by herself. When the bread came out of the oven and was ready to eat, suddenly the dog, the cat, and the duck were eager volunteers to help eat it. But the Little Red Hen told them, “No. Because you did not help, I will just have to eat this bread by myself.” And we applaud that justice has triumphed. You don’t work, you don’t eat.

But remember that Jesus began the story of the laborers with the phrase, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” Lest you’ve forgotten, let me remind you that we’re not in heaven. We all love our country, but let’s be honest, this ain’t no promised land. I’m sure some of you remember the song, *This World is Not My Home*. “This world is not my home, I’m just a-passin’ through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue. The angels beckon me from heaven’s open door, and I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.”

God’s kingdom doesn’t work like our world. (Can I get an “Amen”?) And God’s idea of justice goes beyond our values of equal pay for equal work. Which doesn’t even exist in our country, by the way. Just one example among many is the gender wage gap, where women earn only about 80% of what men are paid for the

same work. Equal pay for equal work? We ourselves don't live up to the values we profess.

One Bible commentary explained that, "Matthew's perspective calls for Christians to understand themselves as belonging to a community, so that no decision is purely personal and individual. Matthew's perspective calls for Christians to understand their lives as being lived in the light of the present and coming kingdom of God, which represents a *reversal of cultural values* rather than their confirmation." (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, p.394)

God's justice is unconditional love, unearned salvation, and amazing grace. God's justice goes far BEYOND JUSTICE in that **all people are worthy because none of us are worthy of God's love.**

The hymn that we will hear following the sermon is titled, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*. Listen to the words of the first verse: "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. There's a kindness in God's justice which is more than liberty. There is no place where earth's sorrows are

more felt than up in heaven. There is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given."

Consider another parable: the story of the shepherd who leaves his flock of 99 sheep unattended to go in search of one who is lost. Economically, that was a bad judgment call. Where is the justice in risking 99% to recover a 1% loss? Who does that? God does that. The parable is not about economics or smart business management. It's about human beings. And it's not about justice. It is about love that goes BEYOND JUSTICE.

Rev. Dr. Craig Howard, who serves as our Presbytery leader, writes a weekly article in the Presbytery newsletter. Last Tuesday, he shared about a course he's taking "on the book of Psalms entitled, *Psalms for Justice Seekers and Peace Makers*." He wrote, "When I signed up for the course, I thought it would be about a select number of Psalms that speak of justice. Instead, I am learning that justice is at the heart and nature of God's identity. Justice is not one thing about God; it is THE thing about God. This is why the Old Testament kings and society [were] called upon to provide justice for the poor and orphaned, [the] widow and [the] destitute. This explains why Jesus went to the outcast and did his ministry with

those on the margins of society.” (Rev. Dr. Craig M. Howard, Know Justice, Know Peace, September 15, 2020, glpby.org, blog)

In her book titled, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris used this illustration to define grace: “One morning this past spring I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking, he would respond with absolute delight. It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it, I felt...awestruck... because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation.” (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Riverhead Books, c 1998, pp. 50-51)

We often boil this parable down to that one memorable phrase at the end: “The last shall be first, and the first shall be last.” But that’s not really the point, in my mind. The point is that everyone gets paid. And there is plenty to go around.

Everyone gets everything they need. Everyone gets invited to the party. Everyone gets an abundance.

Jesus loves you! And he loves me, too. No more, no less. Let's work together to share that Good News... to the glory of God!

AMEN.