

**16 Pentecost
September 20, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In his 1993 book, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, Frederick Buechner offers this advice about reading Scripture: "Don't start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives. Start by listening for the questions it asks." When you hear the question that is your question, you have begun your journey.

So, what is "fair" ... as in "fairness?" What is "just" ... as in "justice?" What is God's idea of what is "fair" and "just," and what is the world's idea of what is "Fair" and "just?"

In this parable of a landowner owner and the laborers, a landowner owner goes out several times in the course of a day to hire laborers for his vineyard. When the long workday is at last over, the landowner pays every worker the exact same wage, and the laborers who started work at the crack of dawn complain. In response, the landowner deflects their accusations with a question: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

This is a parable about fairness and justice. About what is fair ... about what is just ... in this world in which we live ... and the realm of God. The parable begins with Jesus saying, "The kingdom of Heaven is like ..." This is a parable about what is fair and just if we were to act as if God were really in charge of our lives ... if everyone in the world were to act as if God were in charge.

If this parable doesn't offend us at least a little bit, then we're not paying attention. After all, we know what fairness is, and we know how it's supposed to play out. Equal pay for equal work is fair. Equal pay for unequal work is NOT fair. Having our sincere efforts noticed and praised is fair. Having them ignored is NOT fair. Rewarding hard work and ambition is fair. Excusing laziness and sloppiness is NOT fair.

Our culture teaches children and teens that the only place in the world worth standing is at the front of whatever line they happen to be in ... academic ... musical ... athletic ... pre-professional. Why be second when you can be first? Why be mediocre when genius is what pays? Why bother with your neighbor's needs when resources are scarce and time is flying? Work hard ... work harder ... work harder still. Happiness comes to those who labor the longest to achieve the highest success. Because that's how the world works. That's how fairness works.

But, in this parable the landowner is not fair. At least, not according to our inherited beliefs about fairness. If this parable that Jesus tell is about the Realm of God ... the Kingdom of God ... the Kingdom of Heaven ... then God, it turns out, does not believe that the best place to be is at the front of the line. God isn't interested, as we so often are, in showing favor to the best, the biggest, and the brightest ... the workers with the most elite educations, astonishing professional achievements, and fanciest zip codes.

In fact, the landowner in Jesus's story doesn't judge his workers by their hours. He doesn't obsess over why some workers are able to start at dawn and others are not. Perhaps the late starters aren't as literate, educated, or skilled as their fellow workers who started at dawn. Perhaps they have learning challenges, or a tough home life, or children to care for at home. Perhaps they're refugees, or don't own cars, or don't speak the language, or they are afraid they will be picked up by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement police. Perhaps they struggle with chronic depression or anxiety. Perhaps they've hit a glass ceiling after years of effort, and they're stuck. Perhaps employers refuse to hire them because they're gay, or trans, or disabled, or black, or female.

Whatever the case may be, the landowner doesn't ask them to explain or defend themselves. All he cares about is that every last person in the marketplace finds a spot to work in his vineyard ... the early bird and the latecomer, the able-bodied and the infirm, the young and the old, the popular and the forgotten. When the workday is over, what concerns the landowner is not who deserves what. All he cares about is that every worker ends the day with the dignity and security of a living wage. The capacity to go home and feed a family. Sufficient security and peace of mind to sleep well. A solid grasp on hope. A reliable sense of accomplishment, belonging, and dignity.

"Are you envious because I am generous?" asks the landowner. Or literally, in the Greek: "Is your eye evil because I am good?"

I have to admit that I would probably have been one of the 6:00am workers in the landowner's vineyard. Of course I'd be first in line and ready to go before the sun came up. Of course I'd work hard and the long. That's just the way I do things.

But consider this ... the parable reads very differently if you situate yourself at the end of the line. The workers who got more than they expected to ... the ones who received twelve times the pay they knew they deserved ... they were ecstatic at the end of their workday. Ecstatic, stunned, thrilled, and grateful. Their experience was one of utter blessing, and I'll bet that what went on at their end of the line was joyous thankfulness.

But, what about all the other stuff ... the envy ... the bitterness ... the grumbling ... the dissatisfaction? What about all of that murky stuff belonged to the "deserving" folks at the front of the line. They weren't joyous ... they weren't thankful. They were too busy feeling miffed and offended. They couldn't take satisfaction in their hours of good work. They couldn't

delight in the fruit of the vineyard. They couldn't relax into their time off and enjoy their security of shelter and enough to eat.

Though the landowner honored his agreement with them, though they received their daily bread and lacked no good thing, they ended up wasting their off-hours in resentment and anger. "Is your eye evil because I am good?" God asks.

Maybe, if God's generosity offends us, it's because we don't have eyes to see where we actually stand in the line of God's grace and kindness. So, a question is: "Where would you rather stand in this line? At the front of the line, where bitterness and judgment reign? Or at the back, where gratitude has won the day?"

I don't think it's a coincidence that the landowner insists on paying his workers in reverse order, thereby making sure that the first workers see what the last receive. He wants them to experience what radical generosity looks like. He wants them to relinquish their anger and join the party. He wants them to use their plenty to build longer tables, not higher walls.

This story about fairness and justice is a story for us ... a story for this moment ... a story for the times we live in. On the West Coast the air is so polluted from the ongoing wildfires, it's unsafe to leave the house. Human-caused climate change has done this. Meanwhile, Covid-19 is casting shadows of death, fear, hunger, unemployment, and misery all around the world, and many of our collective responses to the pandemic are intensifying the losses. People of color in the U.S and around the world are starving for equality and justice, and some of us are still refusing to honor and address their pain. And, we live in a divided nation as we face a highly divided political campaign ... one made all the more divisive as we consider the future of "justice" in this country.

I wonder what the other landowners have to say about this generous one. "If you pay your workers for not working, then we will have to do the same. If you want to be generous, don't do it in the workplace, we'll never find enough good workers."

I read the other day that if Jeff Bezos gave \$100,000 to every Amazon employee ... up and down the work force ... he would still have as much money as before the pandemic started.

And so, we are left to wrestle with the scandalous generosity of God ... a generosity that calls us to become instruments of grace even to those who we feel don't deserve it. A justice that asks why we so often prefer vindication instead of rehabilitation ... prison cells and death sentences instead of hospitality and compassion. A fairness that exposes our smallness and stinginess ... our reluctance to embrace the radical, universal kinship God calls us to embrace. A sense of justice that reminds us how often we grab at the second chances God gives us, even as we deny those second chances to others. A fairness that dares us to do the braver and riskier thing ... to hold out for the hearts of those who belong to God, whether we think they deserve it or not.

Could it be any more obvious that we ... all of us, every single one of us ... are wholly dependent on each other for our survival and well-being? That the future of Creation itself depends on human beings recognizing our fundamental interconnectedness, and acting in concert for the good of all? That what's "fair" for me isn't good enough if it is not fair for all? That my sense of "justice" is not just if it mocks the tender compassion of God? That the vineyards of this world thrive only when everyone ... everyone ... has the security of shelter, enough to eat, and a place of dignity and purpose within them? That the time for all selfish and stingy notions of fairness is over?

So, if we take seriously what Jesus took seriously the question is: What is fair? What is just? Are we willing to see this yet? Are we willing to live it?

"Are you envious because I am generous?" asks God. Listen for the questions. When you hear the question that is your question, you have begun your journey.

Amen.