

“Justice”

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Holy God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Both our Old and New Testament stories are about difficult subjects. They are about people getting something other than what we might think they deserve. In the story of Jonah, the Assyrians have done terrible things to his people. They do it out of pure lust for power and land; they do it because they can. Jonah feels more than a grudge against them; it's more like a deep, burning anger that is made worse by his, and his people's helplessness in the face of this powerful empire. Jonah's experience of the world is that it has been unjust, especially to the weak, the poor and the powerless. So, as far as he can see, the only justice would be for God to step in and wipe all of them off the face of the earth.

In our New Testament story, the laborers don't so much feel anger as a righteous, or perhaps self-righteous, indignation. The people who worked all day don't think it's fair that the ones who worked shorter hours should get the same income. This attitude is very much based on a sense of fairness that many of us are raised with: people should get what they deserve. You should only get paid if you work and only a fair wage for that work. Otherwise, it's just not fair.

I wonder how many of us might be able to relate to Jonah? Are there those who have harmed people that we care about so badly, so deeply that our secret prayer is for them to be dead? Do we look at the many injustices of the world and fervently pray that the ones who enact those injustices would somehow have to pay—that God would make them pay for what they have done?

And I can almost guarantee that most of us have felt like those laborers from the New Testament story who worked all day. We have seen someone get something we think they didn't deserve—a wage, a gift, a handout, a donation, or some form of charity—and we felt indignant or jealous. We might have been guided by these feelings when voting, believing certain candidates would uphold policies that we regard as “fair.”

Both of these stories seem to turn our understanding of justice on its head, as they redefine justice in God's terms. Let's look first at the parable of the laborers.

This story is definitely a parable—a metaphor for the Kingdom of God. Many commentators suggest that it's a simple comparison—the laborers are believers. The ones who came late will get the same as the believers who were there all along—everybody gets into heaven. But an equally valid interpretation of this story is that it is also about justice in general. If that's true, then it seems to suggest that justice for these laborers isn't based on how many hours they work in a day; it's based on something else.

You see, the wage paid in this story is a daily wage—an amount that a family could live on, if a laborer worked 6 days a week, all day. So, if the landowner only paid a portion of that to the people he hired later in the day, it would definitely not be enough for them to get by.

Still, most of us get frustrated by the landowner's sense of justice in this story. It just doesn't seem fair! The funny thing to me is that our understanding of a fair wage or donation is arbitrary. According to the salaries provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, we seem to have decided that a "fair" wage for a preschool teacher is about \$34,000 (on average), while the "fair" wage for a sales manager is about \$146,000 (https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm#11-0000). Why did we decide this? Not to disparage sales managers, but why do we place so little value, comparatively, on the people who are caring for and raising our children when we're at work? How did we ever decide that this was fair at all?

This seems to be the point Jesus is getting at his parable. We humans arbitrarily decide what is fair or right and then feel slighted or angry when that sense of fairness is threatened. We, like the laborers who worked all day, also tend to think that if someone who is undeserving gets something, then we should be entitled to more, since we have done work that is more deserving.

But justice isn't about people getting what they deserve. Justice is more about making sure that everyone has enough to thrive, and not just whatever we decide is fair for the amount of work they have or haven't done.

The story of Jonah presents a more complicated message about justice. Jonah is rightfully angry at the Assyrians. We know this because God is also so angry at them that God is about to wipe them out. This is an incredibly important part of this story that I think is often missed. The Assyrians are wrong, and they must take incredible steps in order to make amends and rectify their behavior. They have to stop everything that they're doing; I mean their entire society, everything stops. They have to go into mourning, pray, fast, accept blame, apologize and beg for forgiveness. Only then does God relent and change God's mind. So, part of the message here is that justice requires that people who truly do wrong repent and atone for what they've done.

The second part of the message is the one that's hard to swallow for those of us who feel deeply angry at the injustices of the world—that is that God is truly merciful, even to the wicked, if the wicked repent. As God tells Jonah at the end of this story, there are thousands of people and animals in Nineveh and God so deeply loves and respects life, that God wants them to have this second chance to make things right.

These are important messages for us right now. The story of the laborers can make us re-evaluate our current wage policies in the United States or our current coronavirus relief response. Are we like the laborers who worked all day, overly focused on our old idea of fairness? Or are we like the landowner, making sure that everyone has enough to thrive?

Our country is also deeply, deeply divided and angry right now. Have we heard the messages of our God that we should be seeking justice right now—especially for our siblings of color, for immigrants, and for those of lower income? Have we focused our attention on love and life, instead of on wealth and materialism? Have we put this focus on love and life before our normal political affiliations or before our own personal interests? If not, have we accepted responsibility for our failings, repented and changed our ways? And trusting that God will grant us the second chance we so desperately need, can we then extend the same love and grace to others, the way that God does to the Assyrians? Can we stay focused on life, instead of on anger and revenge?

My UCC calendar labels today as Just Peace Sunday. These two stories show us that justice is complicated, and that it has little to do with fairness. In order to bring about a true peace, we need to let go of our common understanding of fairness and focus, instead, on the kind of justice that grants mercy when appropriate, and that allows a full thriving for all of creation. Amen.