

## Sermon TUMC – September 24, 2017

It's not fair!

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Jonah 3:10-4:11  
Matthew 20:1-16

***Children's Time:*** *Make a circle. Go around the circle and say your name and age. "\_\_\_ you're important and God loves you." Who is more important or less important?*

*A circle is like God's love for people, every one is the same in God's eyes. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more or to make God love us less.*

### **Sermon**

A couple of weeks ago, driving back from church, I tuned into a CBC show called *Tapestry*<sup>1</sup>. There was an interview with a scholar called Sarah Ruden, who has done a new translation of the book of Jonah. She was saying that she finds it to be hilariously funny. She thinks it is like a cartoon, over the top funny. That show had a quote by Voltaire: "God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh."

It's not hard to understand Jonah as a comedy being played out.

This week I took my son Eric, who has a degree in French Studies, to watch a Moliere play (*Tartuffe*) for his birthday. On the way he was reviewing a rule of thumb that he picked up in his studies: a comedy is about someone from a lower status reaching a higher status, and a tragedy is about someone from a higher status falling to a lower status. I had no trouble understanding Jonah as a comedy, but by that definition, this parable is a comedy. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

We'll see...

Today I'd like to approach the parable that Jesus told with a few Bible study tools (see underlines). We believe that we interpret the Bible together, in a community (aka the hermeneutic community). I understand that the community means other writers, voices of other theologians, bible scholars, but it also means those of us gathered here.

We are going to consider a few things about this passage, and we are going to create the conclusion of this sermon together. As you hear the thoughts I have to offer, think about how you will complete the sentence: "The Kingdom of God is like..."

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<sup>1</sup> *Tapestry* on CBC: Sarah Ruden, author of *The Face of the Water* <http://www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/tapestry/episode/13980932>

As Anabaptists we understand the Bible as a liberating text, a central text. We believe that God can speak to us through it. That is what we are looking for this morning.

One author says about this parable that “one of its central topics is the affirmation of the humanity of the excluded. It is the proclamation of the God of life, who hears the cry of the poor and the marginalized...”<sup>2</sup>

Telling parables was a common teaching tool in first century Judaism, Jesus’ context. Today it is also a common, as it has been among aboriginal peoples. If you ask a question you may not get a direct answer, you might get a story and have to figure out what that story might have to do with your question.

Jesus is just doing what people do, telling a story in response to a question. We have tended to approach parables and stories in the bible as having a clearcut “moral of the story.” I would encourage us away from that. It might mean different things for different people in different times.

#### How to enter it?

One of the ways I like to enter parables is to imagine that Jesus told them with a twinkle in his eye, to make people squirm and wonder. So I like to enter the narrative with what surprises or bothers me, with what makes me uncomfortable. But before that, I want to uncover some assumptions.

#### What I think I know about the text?

What I think I know is that it is an allegory. Allegories are stories where every character or event is a symbol of something else. So I have often thought about this parable as an allegory where God is the landowner and I am one of the labourers – usually the one that has worked hard all day – and the moral of the story is all about God’s grace being for everyone. It is not something that you earn, it is not based on merit. God as landowner welcomes everybody. I do think it is about that, but maybe that is not all.

What is it NOT about is about Christians and Jews. Unfortunately this has been used by Christians to claim that the Jews are the ones that labored hard for God and that the Christians came along and earned God’s favour all the same. It is NOT about that at all!

The other thing that I think I know about it is that it might be about economics, about people working and getting paid.

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<sup>2</sup> The Laborers of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16): A Hispanic Homiletical Reading, by Pablo A. Jimenez  
[https://drpablojimeneznetwork.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/jimenez\\_laborers.pdf](https://drpablojimeneznetwork.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/jimenez_laborers.pdf)

### What bothers me or surprises me?

What bothers me in this parable is that I identify with the person who worked all day in the hot sun and who, at the end of the day sees others – who didn't! – getting paid just the same.

I'm a third child, and fairness is a big deal to me. When I grew up in Brazil, we didn't have dessert very often (only fruit salad), so when we'd have pie or cake I was the one supervising my Mom to make sure that those pieces were being cut up evenly. I was not going to be ripped off, I wanted to make sure it was fair. (Another example, people cutting in line. It's not fair!)

The other thing that is not fair is disasters. Why did Mexico get an earthquake and Toronto did not? Why did one house fall down and the other one did not? It's not fair!

In my personal life, why did my premature baby not live and others do? It's not fair!

When the Bible says that rain falls on the just and unjust, rain is a good thing. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. It's not fair!

So clearly, this is where I stumble on this parable.

Why? Because I'm a long-time Christian, white, employed, wealthy, and living in North America. I get stuck on the issue of fairness because I hear it from a position of privilege.<sup>3</sup> That's why it bothers me, because I am reading this as a privileged person who assumes that my hard work will pay off somehow. So maybe there is more to it than that. I read it with a lens of competition, scarcity, work equity, fair wages and unionized labour.<sup>4</sup>

And so, as with many scriptures, it is important to note what we are bringing to our reading and how it is shaping our understating.

### Listening to voices other than my own

So it is important to listen to voices other than my own to help understand the parable more fully. Some of the other voices fall into a category that I call "theologies of the unprivileged." There are all kinds of different approaches to

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<sup>3</sup> We can define privilege as a set of unearned benefits given to people who fit into a specific social group. (<https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/09/what-is-privilege/>)

<sup>4</sup> The text presents the unemployed workers' excuse without judgment. And the text assumes a familiarity with how first-century day-labor marketplaces work – which seems not to be a safe assumption for 21st century readers. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.ca/2017/09/fairness-v-justice.html>

theology by people who don't stand in a position of privilege such as I do (Liberation, feminist, mestizo, mujerista, etc.).

One of the critiques by a Latino theologian (Pablo A. Jimenes) is that "...traditional readings usually disregard or distort important aspects of the biblical message for ideological reasons. Such readings responding to the values of the powerful, tends to privatize and psychologize the text. The end result is a reading that postpones the ethical implications of the gospel for the [others]."

Readings like the one I gave you earlier have often labeled the last workers as lazy. There are actually bible commentaries that wonder what they were doing at the main square so late in the afternoon. Were they too lazy to get up early in the morning to find work? Other theologies remind us that there are other perspectives.

It occurs to me that this kind of reading of people who come later and want the same privileges has a lot to do with where we are at in our world in terms of immigration and undocumented workers. The privileged interpretation carries the implication that somehow it is the latecomers fault for being late, when in fact we know that it is about access to work not being the same and about need not being the same.

Back to the opening question: What does this say about the kingdom of God to be in the context of employment and work?

### Taking on different characters

It's also interesting to consider the parable from the point of view of the different characters. I've already explored the perspective of the grumbling worker who thinks that they've worked hard all day.

Day labourers or seasonal workers:

- They are people who "work today not knowing if they will have a paycheck tomorrow." People to this day migrant workers have congregating places where they go and vans come by and take them to work. There are things that happen like people having them work all day and instead of paying them they call immigration services to have them deported. It is a dangerous form of employment. Nobody would do that unless they needed it. It is about opportunity not about morality.
- I had always thought that this parable was about generosity but I had missed the part about the people who didn't have work and what that meant for them. It was not about what the landowner was doing, but what the workers were receiving.

Landowner:

- The landowner had needs. Obviously there was enough work to do, because the landowner kept on going back to the market to get more people to work. The “fresh” workers might even have been a big help to the ones who had been there all day.
- The landowner treated them all as equals, and paid them according to what needed to be done.
- The landowner promised to treat everyone fairly and paid them according to what it was worth to have the work be done.
- The story describes an employer who is not basing his criteria on merit.

### Looking at context:

(Already mentioned immigrants and undocumented workers)

At the time that this story was being told, this kind of work wasn't just an every day practice, to pick up labourers to work on your land. The Roman occupation had changed the rules of the game. There were a lot of people unemployed because their land had been taken away and given to big landowners. Many people had been displaced and the reason they were in the market was because their own land had been taken away.

We also need to look at the context of the parable in the Bible. What happened before the telling of this parable in Matthew?

“The rich young ruler,” the story about the man who comes and says to Jesus: “I’ve lived out every single rule. What else do I need to do to inherit eternal life?” (Jesus doesn’t contradict him). Jesus tells him that he must sell everything he owns. The story goes that he walks away sad. We don’t know if he sold everything or not, but Jesus kept pushing the bar of what was expected.

The disciples said to themselves: Well, we gave up everything, what’s in it for us? Who’s first then? We thought we were special because we gave up everything to be here with you.

Jesus says the first will be last and the last will be first. And as Jesus tells the story the last labourers get paid first, for dramatic impact. Jesus is saying, “if you’re going on the merit thing, you’re playing the wrong game. It is not how it works.

The parable still has labour, they still had to work, they still did work. That is still part of it, but that is not how God’s mercy is measured, by how long you’ve been at it, when you started, when you finished, where you’re at.

Peter was upset because that rich young ruler really made his own sacrifice seem frivolous.

As Anabaptist we understand that working for God's Kingdom (as we call it) is its own reward. So that may be one of the things that is in this parable for us: you are not measuring against others and God is not measuring your life in that way either.

These are things I'm putting out for us to think about, and they may have raised for you. So in conclusion, the kingdom of God is like... (*Open it to the congregation*)

- ...The idea of Ubuntu in African cultures, the spirit of sharing. The genius of community, which turns attention away from oneself and towards others. It is important to watch our own reactions.
- ...A potlatch of equity. Working for social justice but not being the one who benefits from it directly. Just rewards for those who have done the work to lay down the foundations. Potlatch is about Sabbath economics, you take stock and give the extra away to even things out and start again.
- An observation on how nothing has changed in terms of migrant workers. Why do some get work and not others? How is the person making the judgments? There are some who don't get picked. The kingdom of God is where it doesn't matter what kinds of disabilities or disadvantages you have in the worldly appearance of things. God sees your need. God distributes grace on the basis of need.
- ... a police officer that pulls you over for speeding and gives you a donut.
- The usual daily wage is probably the minimum necessary to live on a day. Read the parable of Jesus inventing employment insurance. If you show up and are willing to work you will get enough to live. In this parable it is on the landowner to provide that for the labourer because no one else would. The kingdom of heaven is like leveraging the wealth that we have to insure justice for everyone, not just certain groups of people.
- The kingdom of God is full of surprises.

So what does this have to do with our life?

I would urge us to, yes, understand that God is merciful and just. God might be the landowner. But if you consider that you are the landowner, how are we called to live this week with that kind of generosity that is not based on merit, or performance or success. Look for those opportunities to be the landowner in God's kingdom this week.