

Proper 20 A 2020

Jonah 3:10—4:11

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

Unfair!

How could it be so unfair?

You may think I am talking about the Supreme Court,
And the Senate,
And the death of the incomparable Justice
Ruth Bader Ginsberg –
May her memory be for a blessing.

And you would not be wrong.
But – I was already dwelling on fairness
And unfairness
Before we were knocked flat by the news of her death,
Because unfairness lies at the heart
Of our scriptures for today.

Or – to be more fair –
Unfairness lies at the heart
Of our accustomed reactions
to the gospel parable of the laborers in the vineyard,
And to the story of the prophet Jonah.

Jonah wants God to be just,
To punish and avenge wrongdoing
On those all too frequent occasions
When all of us screw up.
Jonah is angry to discover
That God refuses to meet human expectations,
That God is gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger,
And abounding in steadfast love.
For Jonah,
This is hardly good news.
It makes him furious –
Angry enough to die, he says.
It turns his expectations upside down,
Makes a fool of him,
Leaves him so undone that he thinks he would rather die
Than learn to live in a world

Where God chooses mercy.

It has always been easy
To laugh at Jonah,
Sulking under his castor oil plant –
Which, by the way, is poisonous.
But how many of us can say,
With any confidence,
That we have never gloated
over the downfall of someone we despise?
Or wished for the punishment of someone
We believe has caused great harm?

To tell the truth,
In this moment when we begin to mourn the loss
Of Ruth Bader Ginsberg –
Whose death on the eve of Rosh Hashanah
Marks her as one of the righteous of God –
As we dread the consequences of her death,
How many of us
Have not had a thought of punishing the unjust
Who are already planning an action so unfair?

“Unfair!”
Is a cry we all – or at least most of us –
Keep close to our hearts,
No matter how well we have learned to control it
As we grow a little wiser.

So much that we see around us is unfair.
Unfair to us, perhaps.
But doubly unfair to our neighbors of color.
Unfair to the planet.
Unfair to future generations.

And for me, at least,
That cry of unfair
Offers, in this moment of truth,
A new way into the gospel parable
We are given for today.

If we enter the parable,
Bringing with us the sorrows and outrage
Of this moment of truth,
What might we discover within ourselves?

How is the parable our story?
When do we enter – early or late?
How do we expect
To be rewarded for our work?
What kind of recognition,
What kind of validation do we crave?
What do we think others deserve?

Jesus sets up a story
That hooks so much of who we are
And how our world is put together.
Some people work all day,
And expect a fair wage.
Other people work only one hour,
And get the same pay.
Or, to turn that around,
Some people get to work all day,
While others are not hired.
Is that fair?
There is painful learning for all of us,
When we encounter this story.

This is a parable for beginners.
It starts out meeting us where we are,
Lures us into its embrace,
And then surprises us.
Even blows our minds.

It asks us to accept a basic truth:
That God is generous to all,
No matter what.
No matter what we have done,
No matter what has happened to us,
Whether we think of ourselves as good,
Or bad,
No matter what others think of us,
Beyond all questions of right and wrong,
God is generous.

God will treat us all the same,
and that is good news for all of us.
God will reward us all
With a mercy and welcome
That none of us deserve.
God will embrace us
No matter what.

We have to learn this over and over again,
As our lives change,
And the world around us changes.
We have to enter the parable again,
At the beginning,
And see where we are.

Whatever we may have learned from the parable
In earlier years,
Amid different troubles,
How can we, faced with this year's disasters,
Find a fresh way to hear what Jesus is saying,
A new discovery within the gift of his words?

One way to start encountering a parable,
Is to walk into the story,
And find yourself there.
What does the story look like,
From inside?
What do you look like,
Inside the story?

This year, when I enter the parable,
I can't find myself right away in the story.

I believe that's good news.
It invites me to move beyond my old understanding.
It invites all of us,
I think,
To move beyond what we have known.

It invites us
To move into a realm,
A household,
An economy, if you will,
Unlike anything we experience here and now.

The surprise and wondering
Of this parable
Will not fix the heap of disasters we face in the now.
The image of the kingdom,
The commonwealth of love and justice,
Will not mysteriously heal our planet
Or ensure a free and fair election
Or lead us to racial justice

Or offer a cure for the pandemic
Or safeguard any kind of fair process
In the confirmation of a new justice.

We have to work on those ourselves.
And –
We have to understand that the work only flourishes
If it is inspired and guided from beyond.
To do the work, we need to hold on to hope,
Muster our strength,
Channel our anger into righteousness,
And summon the capacity for compassion.

What the parable can do,
For those of us in the household of faith,
Is to keep the vision alive.

The vision of a beyond,
A more,
To guide and inspire us.

In the beyond,
The more,
The kingdom of heaven,
The vineyard,
The house of life,
Perhaps there is no first and last,
No more or less.

In the economy of God,
Perhaps there is no fairness or unfairness,
No strategies or machinations,
No taking or stealing.

What if,
In God's economy,
There is no measuring at all?

What if,
In God's economy,
Everything is free for everyone,
And nothing is earned?
What if everything is gift?

What if, in God's economy,
Even time is not measured?

What if there is no counting of hours,
Hours of idleness,
Hours of work,
Hours of hopelessness,
Hours of faith?

What if,
In God's economy,
There is no measuring even of love?

What would it mean to keep that vision with us,
While remaining in the here and now,
But finding it transformed?

Life may continue unfair,
For as far into the future as we can see.
No matter how hard we try to work for justice,
To prevent gross miscarriages of justice,
We may fail.

People of faith have failed before.

But the vision does not fail.

We do not have to succumb
To our fears, or our base impulses.
We do need to stay engaged in the world of now,
because our work and witness,
our willingness to bring good news –
a breath of fresh air in the smoke,
a stance of humble solidarity in the face of injustice,
a trust that reconciliation can happen,
in the midst of bitter partisanship –
that work will last for many more long days.

And – we need to keep entering the promise of the parable,
The vision of a world beyond fairness,
A world even beyond generosity,
A world filled with the fullness of all in all,
We need to keep that promise before our eyes,
Because without it we will lose hope,
Lose our capacity for the virtues we need:
Compassion, perseverance, wisdom.

The parable is a beginning.
If life were fair,

It would lead to a happy ending.
Instead,
Because God is gracious,
It leads to a merciful future,
A generous always,
An always welcoming eternal now.