

KGL+
Sermon
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Year A Proper 20
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Friends, the notion of fairness has been an active one in our household for the past few years.

Cries of injustice ring around us at home: about which child gets more ipad or screen time; who got more pasta on their plate; why one child gets **that** cup and the other gets **this** cup (where **that cup** and **this cup** are clearly temporary, moveable designations); who gets to use which legos; why one child got slightly more ice cream than the other. The human proclivity for fairness is ingrained in us, even in children who lack the words to enunciate it verbally.

And honestly? I'd be lying if I was to say that the notion of 'fairness' was limited to preschool and elementary school drama, and not extended to clearly mature adults as well. Without explicitly claiming the 5th Amendment or throwing my beloved spouse under the bus, I can personally attest to many adult "conversations" regarding fairness when it comes to the sink of dishes, the piles of laundry, and who gets to stop their important phone scrolling to trouble-shoot the screams from the other room.

"Are you envious because I am generous?" says the landowner in this morning's parable in the Gospel of Matthew.

And our answer is, 'Why yes. Yes, we absolutely are.'

A landowner sends out for laborers, we are told. Some arrive in the morning, ready for a full day of work. The landowner sends out again, several times throughout the day, seeking out those who are un- or under-employed¹, and inviting them into the vineyard. At noon this happens, and again at 3pm, and finally at 5pm, when it's nearing quitting time. As the laborers line up to receive their wages, the ones who arrive at 5pm are singled out to receive theirs first—and they are given a full day of wages. As the line progresses to those who have been laboring all day, since sun-up, those early birds are holding the tacit assumption that they will receive accordingly more than the usual worker's wage. But they are disappointed when each worker gets paid the same amount.

¹ The translation as 'idle' is more pejorative than the actual Greek usage in this context. Skolazo is the term for 'unemployed, being at leisure, unoccupied'. Argeo, the verb used in this gospel, is 'unemployed, inoperative'. 'Idle' connotes choice.

You hear it in your mind, and want to say it, but I'll say it for us all from way up here: 'It's not fair!' (Insert your own petulant foot-stomp here!)

It seems fairly clear that the laborers who had been in the vineyard all day have been given the short end of the stick. In purely capitalistic measures, they have been. We believe, and many of us have been taught, practical equality—what I put in, I get out in the same measure. If they get one thing, I should get the same. If they end up getting more than I do, or the same for less effort, then I, somehow, have been short-shrifted. I have been undervalued.

Take one more step with me in this parable and consider that the landowner specifically asked that those who came last be paid first—in front of all of the other workers. I doubt there would have been such an outcry should the early laborers have been paid first, and safely out of the way before the same wage just kept being handed out. But the landowner makes sure that there are witnesses to this radical act.

Recall, church, that parables tell us about the nature of God in ways traditional stories or metaphors cannot. “Are you envious because I am generous?” the landowner asks the disgruntled workers. Yes, we say, because we are used to a tit-for-tat economy. We pay \$5 for a \$5 item. If we get a Christmas card from someone, we clearly have to send one back out to them. If they invite us over for dinner, now it's on us to reciprocate. And the corollary is true in this type of economy-- if we don't get a Christmas card or return invitation, we can save our fifty-five cent-carefully-curated-holiday-stamp and call it a fair trade. Somewhere deep in our souls, we have equated justice with equality. Fair means equal. If you get more, I get less.

Our late Bishop Suffragan Bud Cederholm liked to call himself the ‘Green Bishop’², because decades ago he was bringing climate to the attention of a church happily focused elsewhere. When he would visit parishes, he would often encourage them to think differently about their role as church—shifting from owners, to stewards, to partners (or as Bud would say it, ‘pahhhtnahs’)—with the environment.

One of his favorite readings was a midrash on the story of creation from the collection called ‘Does God Have a Big Toe?’ by Mark Gellman³. It has become one of my favorites too, and a regular read when I am feeling the pinch of an ‘It's not fair’ whine along with my cheese. And the story goes like this:

Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, “Why don't you clean up this mess?” So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, “Some of

² <https://www.diomass.org/news/diocesan-news/bishop-bud-cederholm-remembering-life-and-ministry-beloved-servant-leader>

³ <https://www.amazon.com/Does-God-Have-Big-Toe/dp/0064404536>

these clumps will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be... just rocks.” Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, “Some of these pools will be oceans, and some will become clouds, and some of this water will be... just water.”

Then the angels said, “Well God, it’s neater now, but is it finished?” And God answered... “NOPE!” On some of the rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things that only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, “Is the world finished now?” And God answered: “NOPE!”

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, “I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me... really it’s almost done.” But the man and woman said, “We can’t finish the world alone! You have the plans and we are too little.” “You are big enough,” God answered them. “But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner.”

The man and the woman asked, “What’s a partner?” and God answered, “A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough, and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That’s the deal.” And they all agreed to that deal. Then the angels asked God, “Is the world finished yet?” and God answered, “I don’t know. Go ask my partners.”

On the days you think I am not doing enough, and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days, we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world.

When push comes to shove, we often see ourselves as the early workers in the vineyard—the ones who have been there the longest, the ones who are working hardest, the only ones doing the laundry or the dishes, the ones who are clearly invested at a high level of personal sacrificial level. But that’s not always the case—and not always God’s own vision.

Perhaps this parable is less about the needs of each of the workers, and more about the health and thriving of the vineyard—what is good for the vineyard has the potential to create conflict if we understand our own individual needs as paramount, to see ourselves as doing ‘our fair share’ only. But when the harvest comes, the fruits of the vines will be shared among us all, early and late alike. We’ll all be early sometimes. More often, we’ll all be late. Most of all, we’ll be really late, like screeching in at 5pm late. And there is still room for us to join in and start again.

We are God’s partners in this work of tending this vineyard. And we are partners of one another.

The Good News today is that God’s sense of fairness is not our own, which is often limited and fractured and partial. The Good News today is *also* that God’s sense of generosity, is not like our

own. God's generosity is the one which goes out and invites each of us to make a difference in the health and vitality of the vineyard, telling us that there is a space and role for us, no matter when we begin. Our human tendency will be to place the greatest value on the 'when' of when we start, but our God places the greatest value on our 'yes' to the invitation.

So is the world finished yet? What do *you* think, partners?

Amen.