

**Sermon for Proper 20 Year A**  
The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Sept 24, 2017  
The Rev. Paul LeClair

Jonah 3:10-4:11 Psalm 145:1-8 Philippians 1:21-30 Matthew 20:1-16

O Lord, open our eyes that we might see,  
open our ears that we might hear,  
open our hearts that we might love  
and our hands that we might serve.

- Tom Erich

During the summer when TV programming is filled with reruns, Beth and I have been doing a lot of channel surfing to see what other options are out there. We've discovered that there are a lot of courtroom-based "reality" TV shows. It makes me think that there are a lot of viewers who are focused on the concept of justice.

You may recognize the titles of some of these shows.

There are ones named "Court".

The People's Court, Divorce Court, Paternity Court, and Guy Court?

There are ones named "Judge".

Judge Judy, Judge Mathis, Judge Faith, and Judge Hatchett.

I guess that one's for people who have an axe to grind.

And there are ones named "Justice".

Justice with Judge Mablean, Justice For All, Swift Justice, and Judge Karen, whose tagline is, *Justice isn't always black and white.*

No, it most certainly is not.

~ ~ ~

As we heard in our scripture selections today.

people have differing understandings about what is right, or fair, or just.

In this morning's Gospel selection, some of the laborers, thought that their pay should be based on who was hired first or who had worked the most hours. However, the land owner believed that the right thing to do was to keep his word about paying all his workers a day's wages.

Throughout history, and to this day, there are a number of viewpoints of justice. Here are a few I've seen.

One, I would call, "Equal is best."

During my first year of teaching, every teacher that was hired that year was paid the same salary. It didn't matter which grade we taught, which school we taught at, how early we came in before the students arrive, how late we stayed after the students left, or how much we worked at home at night and on weekends. We all were paid equally.

Another concept of fairness I'll call, "Uniformity is best."

At Uncle Al's Burger Castle, all Big Al burgers should have the same size bun, burger patty, slice of cheese, and same super sauce.

All employees wear the same uniform.

And they all welcome each customer with the same standard greeting.

It's only fair that each customer receives the same product and service.

A third concept of what is right I'll label, "Value is best"

This concept is based on the idea that certain qualities make a person more valuable and therefore deserving of special privileges or rewards.

In some workplaces you are valued because of your experience and education.

In a commission based setting one's value is based on how much product is sold. In other settings, none of the employees know what the other employees are paid. Their value is judged at the boss' discretion, which can be quite arbitrary. Talk about blind justice!



This morning, we heard about Jonah.

The people of Nineveh had been acting in ways that were not in accordance with God's will.

So Jonah was sent to speak to them about changing their ways.

Much to God's pleasure, the people of Nineveh did repent and so the Lord showed them mercy.

Jonah however, was so focused on his concept of justice, which was, "evil deserves punishment," that he was actually disappointed when Nineveh's population turned from their evil ways and thus, received forgiveness.

Jonah became angry, stomped off in a huff, and went to cool off in the shade, outside of the city.

Then Jonah demonstrated another concept of justice, one that is often seen on those courtroom TV shows. "What is right, is what is good for me."

When God provided a shade tree, Jonah was contented.

But when the tree withered, Jonah saw himself as a victim of a great injustice.

Today's selection doesn't leave us with a good impression of Jonah.

But (in fairness) we need to remember that at other times he showed great faith.

When caught in a storm at sea, Jonah professed that he was a Hebrew who worshipped the God of Heaven.

When he was in the belly of the great fish, he turned to the Lord in prayer.

Then, after being rescued by God, he did obediently preach in Nineveh, which led to their redemption.

Like so many other characters we meet in the Bible, and like us, Noah has his moments of human frailty, but with faith, and with God's help and mercy, he also was able to serve as an instrument of God's peace and healing in the world.



That brings us to another concept of what is right.

This one is called social justice.

Although we often have strong feelings about them, the solutions to social justice issues are not clear cut, nor black and white. More often, answers are found somewhere in the shades of gray.

For instance, many people are angry that the U.S. is opening up trade relations with Cuba after so many people have struggled so hard to leave that country over the past 60 years.

Others believe that developing a new kind of relationship with Cuba can lead to positive change for the people on that island.

"Who is right?" we may wonder.

Some people appear to be more concerned with abolishing the present health care system than about improving it.

Others oppose new legislation even before the details are presented, not because it may be good or bad, but simply because the other party proposed it.

Are either of these tactics more fair?

Some of us fear that if someone else attains the same privileges that we've benefitted from, that somehow, we've lost something. Those privileges may include citizenship, tax breaks, insurance coverage, pension plans, and other benefits that presently only an elite group has access to. Some see these as rights for all. Others see them as privileges for a select few, while others believe they are rewards to be earned. Where can we find justice?

The Episcopal Public Policy Network works to keep us informed about social justice issues, not based on partisan politics but on our Baptismal Covenant and on the scriptural directive to "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute; to judge righteously; and defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Proverbs 31: 8-9

There are no easy answers to the social issues of poverty, addiction, race relations, political polarity, and the great number of others. Personal dilemmas such as how best to care for a loved one, dealing with a difficult client or work partner, or facing financial challenges can be as overwhelming and equally as confusing for us as society's problems. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry shared in a recent reflection of his, "It may be that we cannot solve everything, and we cannot do everything. But we can do something, no matter what."

When I reflect, I can see that my faith and life experiences have taught me a few things. Here are three of them:

Lesson One, for me, is that it is right to be concerned about the injustices and tragedies that occur in our world.

Change cannot happen, and solutions cannot be found, if we're unaware or don't even care, about the needs of others.

No progress can be made on "Apathy Road."

Lesson Two is that being part of a faith community keeps me focused less on my own desires, and more on the will of God, and the needs of others. I've found it true for me, and I project that it is for others as well, that it's crucial for us to turn to God, and to see God with us in our struggles; guiding us, and using us, so we can serve as God's voice and hands in this world.

Lesson Three is that our Baptismal Covenant can direct us as we seek to act with wisdom and kindness.

It reminds us that, with God's help, we can resist evil, proclaim the Good News, continue in the apostle's fellowship, serve Christ in all people, and strive for justice and peace.



CNN reporter, Romina Ruiz-Goiriena, knows what it's like to stay during a hurricane and to evacuate from one.

As a child, on the same day as her birthday, her family's home was destroyed by Hurricane Andrew.

As her family sought shelter in a tent city, her father went to find water.

Because of the kindness of strangers, he returned with bottled water and a birthday cake! In the midst of the chaos and destruction they celebrated the fact that their family was together.

As an adult, Romina, chose to evacuate before Hurricane Irma struck. She expected to encounter price gouging, reckless driving, and hysteria. But what she found amazed her.

When no hotel rooms were to be found, she turned to Airbnb, an online grid of people who normally rent out space in their homes for profit. But in the wake of Hurricane Irma, Airbnb had turned into a rescue network of people who opened their homes free-of-charge, to provide shelter for evacuees.

When Romina's family went to a restaurant, she found that the owner was welcoming displaced Floridians and inviting them to just pay what they could (or not) and enjoy a meal and to simply rest awhile. She also learned that local diners were adding extra to their dinner bills in order to start a donation fund for evacuees.

The restaurant manager explained, "Here, it's not about the *I* but about the *we*." It's safe to say that those folks were not all Episcopalians, whose actions were framed in the context of the Baptismal Covenant. But their generosity certainly did reflect an understanding of "Love your neighbor as yourself" and the value of working together as a community.



As we seek an understanding of justice in our corners of God's world, let's embrace the vision of the generous vineyard owner in Jesus' parable. May we be thankful for the ability to help others find safety during life's storms; and have the grace to rejoice in the good fortune of others without feeling used, or cheated, or by demanding "Where's mine?"

Let's strive to be generous and compassionate, by making room on our hearts, and our homes, and safe places, for those in need of support and protection. This kind of vision can free us *from* worrying about what's "fair," *to* seeing and appreciating all we've received and how much God has blessed us.

Then the Holy Spirit will compel us to experience the joy of sharing our treasure with those who may not have realized these amazing blessings in their lives.

Amen.

Sources:

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*I fled Irma and found the best side of America*, Romina Ruiz-Goiriena, CNN, September 11, 2011

*The Baptismal Covenant*, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 304-305, Church Publishing Co.

*Yeah, life is unfair ...* Connections, MediaWorks, Londonderry, N.H, suggested by the essay *Beginning at the End*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*.

*The Episcopal Public Policy Network*, <http://advocacy.episcopalchurch.org>