

Matthew 20: 1-16 "Together for Peace" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/17/17

So I got a reminder in the mail a couple weeks ago that I am on jury duty in a week. I groaned out loud causing Ivy to inquire what's wrong. I responded I am just dreading my week of jury duty and feeling guilty about dreading it. It is, after all, my civic duty and our justice system seeks to ensure that everyone has a fair trial with a group of their peers. However, the scary problem with our current system is that the defendant's fate is in the hands of 12 people who couldn't figure out how to get excused from jury duty. I don't want to be that kind of juror. I am told that our county is often short of dedicated, qualified jurors as more and more cases end up in lengthy drawn out battles. Therefore, remembering back to when our esteemed Ellis Martin stood up in church awhile back and made a case for the value of being on a jury, I will do my best to be of service. It doesn't mean, however, that if I am chosen, I won't be nervous about the types of cases I could encounter and the huge burden of deciding what is fair and just for another human being.

That uncomfortableness is due in part to such scriptures as today. The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, according to Barbara Brown Taylor, is a little bit like drinking cod liver oil: You know Jesus is right, you know it must be good for you, but that does not make it easier to swallow. Today's parable, like the parable of the Prodigal Son, is one of those stories of grace so radical that it offends us, because it seems to reward those who have done the least while sending those who have worked the hardest to the end of the line. And just like the Prodigal Son, the story sounds different depending upon whether we identify with the prodigal child or elder sibling, the latecomers or the early risers. The key phrase in this story comes in the words of the employer who tells the laborers they will be paid "what is right" after a day's labor. We have an idea what that should be for the laborers who have worked various hours,

some all day, some just a few. However, at the end of the day, each laborer receives the same amount. Understandably, those who have worked the most hours are angry at the employer, questioning his fairness and justice. Maybe lawsuits are discussed, call Judge Judy, we aren't going to let him get away with this. In our society, people should get what they have earned, get what they deserve no matter what. There is, of course, a humorous side to such demands, like when the woman who was browsing in the clothing section of Macy's, grew increasingly impatient with having to share the attention of one sales lady among many customers. Having had enough of being treated just like everyone else, she blew up, "Why is it that I never get the service I deserve?" The exhausted clerk responded, "Perhaps, madam, it is because we are too polite." If we are honest, we may feel at times we don't get the recognition we feel we deserve, and therefore, we are not only disappointed with the one in charge, we grow agitated with those who have gotten away with one-tenth the effort only to receive the same reward.

This is not a new problem. Even Martin Luther, who started the Protestant movement 500 years ago this month, wrestled with this parable, seeking to look past the minute details of hours worked and paid wages towards the overall actions of a gracious God. The story's vineyard owner blows apart our mentality of "deserving," giving us this whole new understanding of justice. We have perceived justice as "what someone deserves" based on what they have done. We teach that to be given "what is right," as the vineyard owner stated, is to be given what is earned. Here is where the cod liver oil begins to choke in our throats as God says no it doesn't – not in the realm of God, not in the kingdom of heaven, the term Matthew uses for God's realm. Jesus is trying to teach us that justice, in the biblical sense, has nothing to do with merits, rewards, and achievements. Instead, justice is revealed in the

generosity of the vineyard owner who pays each worker what they need to provide for their families. Justice is understood as a state in which everyone receives what is sufficient to the needs of the person. All children of God are equally deserving, separate from actions or personal qualities, and entirely dependent upon their identity as children of God, as laborers in the vineyard. Period.

Now that is some tough stuff to swallow, if you ask me. Unless you sat down and watched for a few hours the multiple water rescues made after Hurricane Henry and Irma struck. Not one of the rescuers I saw began questioning people regarding their wealth or religion, their contribution to society, education, legal documentation, their right to get in the boat versus being left out in the cold. As far as I could tell, everyone was treated equally by those first responders, receiving what was sufficient for their needs, practicing a biblical sense of justice. If instead, we saw emergency personnel dividing people up according to what they have achieved in life, what they could give back to society, then this would be a form of violence which is seen as the very core of evil in the Bible. Pope Paul 6th said, "If you want peace, work for justice," and he wasn't speaking of the kind of justice we are so accustomed to in our society. He was speaking of justice as we saw played out in home after home where people were seen as human beings in need, God's children at risk, who were being cared for. For some reason, our kinder, gentler selves come out in such tragedies and we not only see people as our equals, all deserving of the same treatment, but we also work together side by side to make sure it happens. There is certainly no more powerful image than We pay tribute to those who place themselves in harm's way, placing themselves last so that others might be saved first. Yet nowhere in the drama of the past 2 weeks did the question arise as to who is

more deserving, unless it is the most vulnerable and the least able to contribute, in other words, the elderly and children. It is right and good that we were horrified and angered by the 8 Florida nursing home deaths due to overheating, but where is our indignation when those same elderly are denied basic life-saving health benefits because of their age or poverty status? If you want peace, work for justice.

I was reminded of this truth not very long ago when McDonald's, and I believe Wal-Mart, published information for their full-time employees on how to make ends meet, living on the wages the companies provide. Among the suggestions were applying for food stamps, visiting neighborhood pantries for food, and applying at local charities for rent and utility assistance. Workers were so enraged they started a movement towards increased wages and better benefits for all the employees. In contrast, a small supermarket chain based out of Massachusetts called Market Basket tells a different story. Their CEO, Arthur T. Demoulas, was a very wealthy man who made a truck load of money off of his family's stores. But he also treated store employees more fairly than almost any other chain in America. He paid them a little more than other chains, for which the workers were grateful, as well as made sure they were provided with steady schedules, time off, and health care benefits. He kept prices low because most of the stores were in modest income neighborhoods where high prices would be a stretch for many of the residents. And he made money too, not just for himself but for his family and stockholders. According to Forbes, they made an estimated \$217 million in earnings on \$4 billion in revenue in 2013. However, in the minds of his cousins and board members, it wasn't enough so in the summer of 2014, he was fired and cousin Arthur S. Demoulas took over. He immediately changed the profit sharing policies to give less to the local store

managers and more to the absentee board members and stockholders. The workers in the stores erupted in protest and walked out, customers boycotted, and suppliers found other locations to sell their products. Sales dropped dramatically within weeks until Arthur T. was able to buy back the badly damaged company from his cousins and board members for nearly \$1 billion using everything he had to claim it once more. Millions of dollars were lost during the protests but the customers and employees have returned and are working together to bring the company back from the dredges, working together to ensure everyone has enough. This is how justice in the eyes of God is created – together. If you want peace, work for justice. And by doing so, just maybe we will experience a decrease in the need for jurors, as the needs of God's children are met and grace becomes a way of life for all.