

Year A, September 24, 2017
16 Pentecost (Proper 20)
Christ Church, Mexia

“Three burly fellows on huge motorcycles pulled up to a highway café where a truck driver, just a little guy, was perched on a stool quietly eating his lunch. As the three fellows came in, they spotted him, grabbed his food away from him and laughed in his face. The truck driver said nothing. He got up paid for his food, and walked out.

One of the three cyclists, unhappy that they hadn't succeeded in provoking the little man into a fight, commented to the waitress: 'Boy, he sure wasn't much of a man, was he?' The waitress replied, 'Well, I guess not.' Then, looking out the window, she added, 'I guess he's not much of a truck driver, either. He just ran over three motorcycles.'" (Hodgin, 193)

It is an amusing story for most of us, and perhaps one where we see justice being done, at least a little bit. But that's not God's justice; that's justice according to man-made rules.

This morning in the gospel reading Jesus told the parable of the vineyard owner who went out and hired laborers as was the custom of the day. Like the early days of this country, it was an agrarian economy where land was owned by the wealthy and if you were poor and needed work to feed yourself and your family, you stood at the appointed place and hoped to be picked to work in the fields each day. And we have similar arrangements now in this country in construction, etc. The wage then was usually what was required to feed a family for that one day; I'm not sure how that compares to today.

The owner goes out in the morning as usual and selects his workers for the usual pay. Then he goes again mid-morning and finds some others still standing there waiting for work and he hires them. And he does it again at noon and mid-afternoon. And then at 5:00 o'clock – about an hour before evening when he told his manager to call them to be paid. And he starts with the last ones hired, and here is where we may begin to get uncomfortable – why not those who worked longest, those hired first? And can you believe it? He pays all of them the same amount! Now most of us are like the workers of the story – how can this be? Because these are not the rules we envision in our economic system; this is not **OUR** concept of justice or fair pay!

Marcus Borg writes in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* that when he was discussing the prophets' concept of justice in his religion class, he realized there was a disconnect. Thus, he asked, "When I say the word 'justice,' what do you think of?" And after an awkward period of silence, believe me I know, one student responded that he thought of the criminal justice system. So, let me just point out here that the United States, while it has about 5% of the world's population, has 25% of the world's prison population. Or stated differently, we have 716/100,000 people in prison while over half of the world's 222 countries have less than 150/100,000 in prison. And according to US government statistics it cost taxpayers, in FY 2015, a little under \$30,000 per year on average to maintain one prisoner for that year. Does any of this make sense to you, in either religious or secular terms? Because it doesn't to me! But I digress somewhat.

The point is that the prophets of the Bible were not talking about criminal justice, of course; they generally raised issues of social justice. Because after Israel was freed from slavery and oppression in Egypt and made it to the promised land, they eventually wanted a king, and then they developed systems that put many, if not most of them, back into similar oppressive situations like they had experienced in Egypt – the very type of systems and the type of thinking that currently exists in our country. Hold that thought for a moment please and let's return to the parable for a moment.

Why does the vineyard owner go out several times during the day? By our standards, and I would infer theirs as well, wouldn't you hire all the people you need, if they were available, in the morning, when they could work all day? You would think. So it doesn't seem likely that he simply hired a few and then kept going back to whittle down the crowd. It seems to me then that he most likely hired everyone who was there at the time, and later, he found others who came later for whatever reason. The alternative would seem to be that he didn't really need to hire them at all, but did so out of the kindness of his heart. Could be; but seems less likely. Anyway, he hires them all and insists on paying the daily wage that every worker needed to every worker he hired regardless of the time on the job – that's the point. I think to God it is important that every person have daily bread, as Jesus taught us to pray – "Give us this day..." This would be an example of social justice.

Unfortunately, this seems like an unthinkable action in our capitalistic system. Therefore, the tension between the dream of God and the domination implicit in our system remains. To take a related but

slightly different example, many do not believe in a minimum wage, a "daily bread" wage, if you will. And at our current Federal minimum wage of \$7.25, which has not increased since 2009 – though costs of living certainly have – a person making a minimum wage today would have to work a minimum of 60 hours per week, every week, in order to earn enough gross income that would place them approximately at the calculated poverty level – not really above it, because their net income would be less. Does that sound like social justice? And unfortunately, if there weren't a minimum wage requirement, most employers probably would pay less, and I'll address this in just a minute. Partly because of this situation I have described, 29 states have passed a higher minimum wage than the Federal standard – but sadly, not Texas – still at \$7.25.

And it isn't just time worked, it's status or position that exhibits oppression. The average CEO pay has risen almost 1,000% since 1978 (or from \$1.5 million to \$16.3 million). Contrast that with the typical worker (82% of the payroll, and not the lowest paid worker) whose income went from \$48,000 to \$53,200 over the same time period, a little over a 10.8% increase. Thus, the CEO now makes approximately more than 300 times the pay of the typical worker. Now add to this information that the preponderance of current economic research informs us that the huge national deficit and income inequality are the two major factors creating problems and restricting our economic growth. And that this year the top one percent control 50 percent of the wealth of the U.S. We might ask then – do the wealthy need a tax break? – especially at the expense of health care for millions of Americans, and cuts in Medicaid funding on which two-thirds of the elderly in nursing homes in this country rely upon for a place to live and get necessary care – care that they had no ability whatsoever to save for because working in our current economic system doesn't permit it, unless you're at the top or near the top. And time doesn't allow for more examples of demographic groups who depend on Medicaid support.

And one last thought – I know of some people who will actually commit crimes in order to be put into prison; it's the only place they can insure a roof over their heads, three meals a day, access to fitness facilities, and especially to have access to dental and health care. Does that sound like social justice? Or is that how we want to spend money to care for people? I don't think of myself as a prophet – just saying... Jesus is telling us about the Kingdom of God. God sometimes takes a different view of justice than we do; I believe that we should reflect more often on whose justice we are seeking.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.