

This week we celebrated the International Day of Peace. It's a "call to action that recognizes our individual and collective responsibility to foster peace" ([internationaldayofpeace.org](http://internationaldayofpeace.org)). So I set out to write a sermon about...you guessed it. Peace! And then I ran into this story.

A landowner went out first thing in the morning, just as the sun was peaking over the horizon—to find workers for his vineyard. I'm guessing he looked at the pool of people, picked some of the finest, strongest looking workers, agreed on a day's wage—let's say about 45 bucks for ten to twelve hours because that's a fairly common wage for a migrant farmworker in North Carolina—and returned with the men to the fields.

Later, let's say after the time it takes to eat a decent breakfast, drink coffee, and read the New York Times, the landowner went back out. Perhaps he had an errand to run or maybe he was dropping his kids off at school. Whatever the reason he sees more workers standing around waiting for work. As an aside, this happens every day in almost every town in America. People without jobs linger in gas station parking lots waiting for the opportunity to provide labor with pay. Others wait in unemployment lines or on hold with governmental service providers. Still others scour Monster.com or LinkedIn looking for a job that might keep their families in their houses. Some might even come home after

working two jobs and read over the classified ads for a third job so they can provide enough to live.

Unemployment and under-employment are harsh realities of our country. ... So the landowner sees these people still lingering in the square. He sends them to his vineyard with the promise of a day's fair pay.

This again happens at lunch time and 3:00—maybe during a quick trip for lunch or some Starbucks, he sees some folks waiting for a job over by the Home Depot, and offers them the job as well. Dinner time rolls around, and the landowner sees still others waiting for a job. He looks at his watch. It's 5:00! "What are you still doing out here?" He asks. They have not gotten any work for the day. Even though it's a mere few hours until quitting time, he sends them to his vineyard.

As the sun is going down, he takes his check book out to the vineyard, and brings in the 5 o'clockers—the ones who had only been there a few hours. Each one of them gets a check for \$45.00. The the 3 o'clockers came to him. They too received a \$45.00 paycheck. The noon workers and the 9 o'clock workers also got \$45.

Those who worked from sunrise to sunset were last. Tired and sun-beaten and probably hungry they each receive their checks. For forty five dollars. 4-5. "So let me get this straight," one of them says

with a tone of irritation in his voice, “the guys who started working at 5 got 45 bucks.” “Yes.” “But they only worked two hours!” “Yep.” “That’s basically \$20 an hour!” “Uh huh.” “I’ve been here for twelve hours, and I only got \$45. That’s a little over \$3.00 an hour AND I’ve been here in the bugs and the heat and the pesticides AND I worked harder than them! That’s not fair!”

“What’s not fair about it?” the landowners asks. “You and I agreed on the \$45. You kept your end of the bargain, and I kept mine. This is my place, and this is my money. And here is your check.”

And so, Jesus says, the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

WHAT? Are you kidding me? This can be one of the most frustrating parables for me! As someone who has worked for peace, justice, and equality what Jesus says feels a *little* like justice. Especially for those on whom the world has been hard. It’s nice to imagine that toil on earth—being the last—will result in a spiritual equivalent to being upgraded to first class. BUT. Is that peace and justice? It is my understanding is that justice doesn’t necessarily mean elevating the oppressed to places above us or helping people out of guilt simply because we are to remember that Jesus puts the last first and the first last. That’s not really what my understanding of justice is about. Likewise for me it doesn’t really

mean that everyone has to have the same type of something all the time—a reason why I struggled with this text this morning.

I once saw an illustration that said “equality doesn’t equal justice.” And it proved a good point. It was a drawing of three people of differing heights, standing behind a fence. On the “equality” side all three people have the same size box on which to stand. The tallest can see over the fence. The middle one can barely see, and the shortest one cannot see over the fence at all. On the “justice” side each person stands at the same height, with the same visibility over the fence. They are standing on differently-sized boxes. Were we to use this metaphor, it would be hard to see where the justice is in this text. Equality, yes, but I think the grumbling people make a point. It really doesn’t seem fair. Perhaps the landowner should have re-evaluated. Perhaps he should have learned about what a living wage might be. Perhaps we shouldn’t be reading this text on the heels of the International Day of Peace. Perhaps we should gain our hope from the mustard seed or the swords into ploughshares or John 3:16.

Am I sounding ungrateful? That’s because this is how I felt about these texts this morning. And please don’t misunderstand my gratitude that God for provides no matter what—for that I am grateful.

Everybody got paid in the parable. We might have to suffer in the Epistle, but we still get eternal life. It

didn't rain cheeseburgers in the desert, but the Israelites had manna and water and enough to sustain their bodies. Perhaps I should allow myself the struggle to find the peace. Perhaps I should accept that even when life is unfair God does provide.

But when I began to feel these things I found it harder and harder to think about or write a sermon about peace. The sheer provision of God? Yes. God fighting the good fight, struggling with us, crying with us, sitting with us in our most painful moments? Yes. But I am not at ease and certainly not at peace about it. This seems peace-less. And the fruits of our labor for equality seem weak and bruised, leaving much to be desired. Maybe it's because I'm a grumbling Israelite or an unhappy morning worker. Maybe at first I was happy for the chance or freedom or a job, but after a while I grew tired of the work and the sun. And if I'm not one of those lucky-yet-uncomfortable people, then I'm certainly one of the last—one of the people who had to worry for the day about not having a job, one of the Philippians who must struggle and labor and die to self to gain footing in “first place by way of last place.”

Are you with me? Are you just as confused about peace and justice now? Maybe I should have just left it with everyone gets 45 bucks and equality and “yay justice.” Maybe. But please indulge and travel with me for just a wee bit longer.

What if I wasn’t an Israelite or a laborer at all? What if I were the giver of the birds and bread? What would I experience if I were the landowner? Ah. Now we’re getting to some peace and justice. Perhaps what God wants is not for us to necessarily put ourselves in the shoes of others, even though that has merit. Perhaps what God wants is for us to put ourselves in the shoes of God, the landowner. Because the peace and justice that comes in this text is not that everyone got the day’s wage and that the last were provided to first, while the first worked up until the last. The peace and justice if in the landowner, who in a way is both first and last. First, because he’s the one with power. He has the land and he has the wallet. Last, because, well, he chooses to be there. He chooses to be the one who gives. This man had every right to take \$3.34, multiply it by two hours, and write a check for \$6. 68 for the five o’clocker. Instead he empties himself and his wallet for every worker who entered his vineyard that day. Instead he gathered any laborer in his sight every time he went out and offered them work. It was in his generosity and in his giving that he became both first and last. And in the end, even though the laborer who complained was there to be his *employee*, this landowner called him friend. “Friend, I am

doing no wrong. Friend, this belongs to you. Friend. “And in this fact I see a lot of hope, peace, and justice.

In the kingdom of heaven and earth we are not necessarily meant to be mimickers of the workers. We are not meant to live into the economy of the world, dividing ourselves up by socio-economic status or political party. We are, instead called to follow God’s lead and live in God’s economy—the economy of justice and peace.

If I’m a worker, I’m an all-day heat-sick, grumpy worker who deserves more pay or I’m a half-day lunch-break worker or I’m a very part-time, most-of-the-work-has-already-been-done-but-thanks-for-the-opportunity worker. If I’m a landowner on the other hand, I see all people with the same value.

They are all workers for a common cause. And when I see that first—let’s say when I see first that one is not lazier or stupider or more hard working or more deserving; when I see every person as deserving of their daily bread, when I drop all notions of who is more deserving than the other, when I see that each person is a child of God, not only can I disregard how *long* one has played such a role—be it his whole life or for three hours, but my heart can also open to giving freely to each, even challenging myself to give more than I thought I would. And again in this circumstance I am not talking about the

economy of the world in money and wages (I mean... please tithe); I'm talking about the economy of God—the riches being love, grace, and patience.

Were I to be rich in God's economy but hoard my riches, giving out certain amounts per value judgment I place on people, what I give is not true nor free nor of God. It will not bring peace to the world and peace to my heart. In fact, were I to take the charisms of God's economy and proceed to *not* recognize or acknowledge the God in all, I might as well be in the economy of money and social status.

Were that I to simply view each person as brother, sister, sibling, parent, friend, child of God; were I to understand the simple fact that we all carry within us God's vibrant spirit of life and love;

were I to see myself as such a being, I too might find myself in a place of gentleness and peace inside.

I too might be able to be the landowner inside myself—the first and last,

The giver and receiver, teacher and learner, helper, *friend*,

peace-filled and peace-maker.

The Rev. Lauren Kilbourn St.David's 9/24/2023 Pentecost 17