



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Justice and Mercy

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The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Based on Matthew 20:1-16*

Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit and ignite in us your holy fire; strengthen your people with the gift of faith, revive your Church with the breath of love, and renew the face of the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There is a story about a man who paid a successful business tycoon a visit in order to hopefully persuade him to allocate some of his wealth to those who were more financially vulnerable. Not long into their conversation frustration ensued, for the business tycoon was uncooperative, and the visitor felt that the businessman's stockpile of money mocked the destitution of the people that he was there to represent and was an injustice. In his view, wealth was meant to be divided more equally. So, the businessman shrugged his shoulders and asked his assistant for an assessment of everything he owned and at the same time he looked up the statistical figures of the world's population. He did a little arithmetic and then said to his assistant, "He wants what is equal, so give this gentleman 16 cents. That's his share of my wealth."

Of course, that certainly wasn't the type of response the visitor was hoping to solicit from the successful tycoon. The entire encounter aggrieved his sense of justice and fairness.

Today's parable in our Gospel narrative also aggrieves our sense of justice and fairness. We learn of a vineyard owner who goes into town at dawn to hire workers, most likely because it was harvest time. He agrees with each worker to pay them what is right, the going rate for a daily wage, and hires laborers throughout the day who show up looking for employment at 6am, 9am, noon and 3pm. In a seemingly odd move, he adds an additional work shift and hires laborers at 5 o'clock, right before the end of the 12-hour work day.

At 6pm the manager settles the accounts. The folks who came last and worked only for one hour are paid first and receive, astonishingly, the full daily wage. The workers who had been there since six in the morning assume that they will receive more than the ones who only worked an hour, but instead are sorely disappointed when they, too, receive the same daily wage. They begin to complain. Everything they know about how life in this world is supposed to work tells them that this owner isn't being fair.

"Why would people who haven't worked as hard or as long as us get the same reward?" Well, that may be what also annoys us, if we're truly honest. This parable vexes our sensibilities. Something about it just doesn't sit right with us and perturbs our sense of entitlement, just a bit. That's because we probably identify most with those workers who worked all day, and it's hard to reconcile the gracious generosity of

the landowner when he asks, “Are you envious because I am generous?” We, too, might be equally resentful and complain.

But, we must remember that Jesus isn’t telling us a parable about the way this world works. He’s telling us a parable of the kingdom according to God’s economy, the world the way God desires it to be: a world where everyone receives equal treatment despite what each person has chipped-in or what they have accumulated. It is a kingdom where everyone is endowed with the same dignity, worth, respect, value and reward. And where “the last will be first, and the first will be last.” It is a kingdom that upholds justice with mercy.

The business tycoon in the opening story may have been acting according to a set of impartial rules that he set up in order to make a point, and his response was a bit cheeky. But these rules were divorced from any mercy. On the other hand, the landowner in the parable viewed the situation through the lens of grace. Frederick Buechner wrote that “Justice... does not preclude mercy. It makes mercy possible. Justice is the pitch of the roof and the structure of the walls. Mercy is the pattering of rain on the roof and the life sheltered by the walls. Justice is the grammar of things. Mercy is the poetry of things.”

Justice that is carried out within the kingdom of God—compared to justice that is carried out in this world— is not simply quid pro quo reciprocity. In its fullest, most advanced and evolved form, justice is without favoritism or discrimination and is coupled with empathy, compassion, and understanding, all attributes of mercy. Justice does not allow injury or harm to flourish—which would undermine it—but relies instead upon mercy to discipline it and bring it into its fulfillment.

It is important for crucial humanitarian issues of our time to be considered from the viewpoint of merciful justice instead of being mired in biased political controversy. In seeking to address issues such as affirmative action, immigration legislation, workers’ rights and minimum wage laws, voting rights or health care legislation, how can we shape our thinking and reasoning about these matters using kingdom-type compassionate justice in order to realistically and accurately assess their impact? How can we as people of God embrace radical mercy and humane justice even as the world runs in the opposite direction?

Just as the landowner upset the norm by showing unanticipated generosity, Jesus came to upset the norm by launching a revolutionary movement to replace the status quo kingdom of the world with the just and merciful kingdom of God. And we affirm his desire to do just that every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer and we say, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.” We faithfully pledge to help create the kingdom of God right here on earth.

One of the most dramatic illustrations of justice and mercy in literature has to be the iconic scene between Monseigneur Bienvenu and Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo. Jean Valjean, after serving a long prison sentence for stealing bread to feed his starving family, once again finds himself in another dreadful situation. On a cold and rainy evening, with nowhere to go, he is offered shelter by the Monseigneur Bienvenu. Not having any money or work prospects, Valjean steals some silver pieces from the parsonage, only to be caught by the local police and dragged back to the parsonage in order to be confronted about the theft. But instead of confirming the crime, Bienvenu sees the unfortunate event as an opportunity. It is, in effect, a choice to either banish Valjean back to a life in prison in the name of criminal justice or to save his life in the name of radical mercy. The priest chooses to yoke justice together with mercy and responds to Valjean and the authorities with words which convict, but do not condemn. He says to Valjean, “Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man... Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!”

Valjean is astonished at the Monseigneur's mercy which brings about a turning point in his life. It is justice through restoration; justice without mercy is callous; but justice with mercy is regenerative.

Indeed, this scene from *Les Misérables* mirrors the truth of our own restored relationship with God through Christ. Justice demanded that the debt of our sins against God be paid, but it was Christ's mercy on the cross that paid our debt in full—a debt that we were not able to pay ourselves—in order for us to be reconciled with God.

Since we have been treated with such merciful justice, can we walk that same way of love and pay the debt for others with mercy which flows from our own hearts?

Biblical parables are like mirrors, and they beg us to put ourselves in the story. No matter where we see ourselves in line for our wages—either first or last—Jesus is asking us to consider how we will respond to God's great and overwhelming mercy towards us and towards others. Will we begrudge the blessings given by God to others, or will we rejoice with them and give gratitude to God who lavishly extends the radical mercy of Christ to us?

In the words of the psalmist this morning, "The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness." Let us follow suit and respond whole-heartedly with merciful justice, loving kindness and humility towards those we encounter, as we ceaselessly work towards bringing the kingdom of heaven closer, ever closer to dwell upon the earth.

Amen.

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