

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

September 24, 2023

Fairness or Justice

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”¹ Writer Mary Gordon, in her book *Reading Jesus*, answers God’s question with a very honest **Yes**, “I am envious because you are generous. I am envious because my work has not been rewarded. I am envious because someone has gotten away with something. Envy has eaten out my heart.”²

Mary almost echoes the quote from Anne Lamont I used last week that withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.³ Being obsessed with fairness can lead to a similar sort of poison, not vengeance this time though. Instead, we’re dealing with envy...a vice almost entirely dependent on the idea of “fairness.”

Where does our concern for fairness come from, I wonder? It certainly seems to be a common stage of human development and maturation. Both of my children, and many other children I have taught or interacted with, have at some point told me some version of, “that’s not fair!” Perhaps this comes from humanity’s natural inclination to classify, to compare and contrast.

Don’t get me wrong, our ability to compare, contrast, and categorize is an amazing evolutionary ability. I just fear that it is one that we rely on too often! As the adage goes, when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And into this propensity Jesus comes along to show us how we were created to live, as people of justice, not of fairness.

The difference between these two concepts is clearly important to Jesus. Which means we would do well to explore them if we wish to walk the Way of Christ. The parable we hear today from Jesus resoundingly dismisses our preoccupation with fairness. Fairness, at least the way it is most often

¹ Matthew 20:15 (NRSVUE)

² Mary Gordon, *Reading Jesus; A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

³ Lamont, A., *Traveling mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. (Anchor, 2000).

employed, is focused on the individual. It requires the individual to compare themselves to others to determine if comparable effort is receiving comparable benefits. It requires all sorts of judgement and rarely considers nuance or context.

Equal pay for equal work is fair. The reverse is **not fair**. Being rewarded for extra effort is fair. Having our efforts be ignored is **not fair**. Pursuing ambition and being praised for it is fair. Slouching off and excusing laziness is **not fair**. Condemning sinners is fair. Not seeing those terrible sinners get theirs is **not fair**. Yet the Lord asks Jonah, as he sits in the unfairness of his life, "Is it right for you to be angry?"⁴

A particularly pertinent question! Our preoccupation with fairness often leads us to anger and outrage. A fact capitalized on by all sorts of evil powers at work in the world today. Those powers ask us questions like:

Is it fair that **they** get food stamps, and you don't get any help?

Is it fair that **they** got admitted to the school you wanted to get into?

Is it fair that **they** got seen by the doctor before you, even though you were here first?

Is it fair that **they** won the election when you voted for the other option?

Now stop a minute...I suspect you've entertained a question or two like the ones I just asked at some point in your life (we all have). When you find yourself dwelling on those sorts of questions, what do you end up feeling, if not anger? And is it right for you to be angry?

These two questions: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"⁵ and "is it right for you to be angry?"⁶ drive right at the heart of the difference between fairness and justice.

Fairness is entirely concerned with the "I," the individual, the ego, the self. Fairness wants to "get and keep what's mine." Fairness leads us to confrontation and conflict. Fairness often involves trying to take from others, or even pulling them down to be at the same level you are at. Fairness, at its heart, is a selfish value. It's what we get concerned with when those that showed up at the vineyard last minute still get what they need to live; and its fairness that leads us to expect more than what we need.

⁴ Jonah 4:4b

⁵ Matthew 20:15

⁶ Jonah 4:4b

Justice, on the other hand, is focused on community. Justice is concerned with wholeness. Justice often means giving things up for the sake of others. Justice means getting down in the pit with the suffering and working together to escape. Justice wants to see that all have what they need. Justice is a selfless value. It's what happens when God's values are centered and when we are truly walking the Way of Christ.

Bringing this text into conversation with Matthew 18. Justice means centering the powerless, while fairness has us centering ourselves. Justice means holding people and communities accountable, while also pursuing reconciliation. Fairness means an eye for an eye and retribution. Justice means adopting a stance of forgiveness to seek communal and individual healing and health. Fairness would have us holding grudges since freely given forgiveness is in no way shape or form fair!

God's grace is extended to all. God intends salvation for all. Is this fair? No, not really. But it is just. Because God is just and God's justice is more complete than anything we could ever concoct. God wants the needs of all met. God wants all of humanity to live in healthy and whole community with one another and to commune with God and creation.

The final irony is that our obsession with fairness means we often miss out on the joy of God's justice! I doubt that the order in which the landowner has the workers paid is coincidence. The landowner met the needs of all the workers, justice was done. But those early workers were so bent out of shape because of fairness they couldn't even join in the joy of the later workers. At the end of the day everyone's needs were met, but much of the community ended up bitter and envious because of **fairness**.

It is difficult in our individualistic society, which is overly concerned with fairness, to hear of the justice of God. But at the end of the day, we should be rejoicing with the late-comers at God's justice since it means when we're late-comers we can still know God's love, grace, and merciful justice. The Way of Christ teaches that we should want for our neighbors what we expect to receive from God ourselves. Amen.