

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

RCL Lectionary, Year A, Proper 20

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***Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California***

An Unfair God

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Well, this week the world changed, didn't it? Over night the rules on stock trades tightened, an esteemed Wall Street institution disappeared, a huge international insurer was buttressed by the federal bank, and both presidential campaigns completely re-tooled their messages around that now old adage: "It's the economy, stupid." And after a week where some people woke up to find themselves without work, without pensions, or at least somewhere they didn't expect to find themselves on the vast spectrum between lots and nothing. . . central banks worldwide began coordinating their efforts, and our national leadership decided it was time for the government to work out a way to bail out the free markets to the tune of \$700 billion. It's a figure that seems too huge to me to imagine. Then the papers report that part of this will involve raising the national debt ceiling to \$11.3 trillion, a truly staggering number indeed. I'll stop there. Many of you know the story better than I.

So why bring up the greatest financial meltdown, some say, since the Great Depression, in a sermon on a sunny morning at Church of Our Saviour? Why talk about dollars, debt, and the economy at all in a liturgy all about God? Because, of course, first and foremost, some of our members live, work, and breathe in the world of numbers and finance. Some of our sisters and brothers have been hit by the unprecedented swings in the markets this week – and have lost. And all of us are uncertain about what happens next. And then, in comes today's very strange parable about simple street economics, and I am left wondering just what is the connection between Wall Street, Main Street, and the Jesus' imagined street where the workers are hanging out waiting for employment in the vineyard.

Over lunch this week, a colleague put it quite simply: It's not fair. Period. We are rankled, some openly, others quietly inside, about CEO's walking away from failed financial giants with tens of millions in golden parachutes while nameless employees of the same companies, good, hardworking people who have devoted decades to the institution, are left with valueless savings or pensions and nowhere to turn. We might be rankled, too, if we were in Jesus' parable, first to show up to the vineyard but discovering at the end of the day we receive no more than those who arrived at 5 o'clock. And might not we be annoyed with the landowner, God even, who argues like any governing board or manager that we received what we agreed to – CEO or office assistant – along with all the risks, perks, and privileges. It's not fair. And if Wall Street and the current mess in the nation's economy punches a hole in good old-fashioned notions of American fairness, then so does today's Gospel. Full stop.

In some ways, it's even easier to cope with Wall Street's unfairness. Risk, we could say, is part of the game we sign up for when we invest either ourselves, our capital, or both. But we didn't really sign up to invest in God's universe. . . we simply *are* here. So if God is just as unfair, maybe we have even a greater cause to complain. At the heart of our theological angst is the same fear at the heart of the greater world's angst this week: that bad things happen to good people, and rarely do we receive what we expect, what we consider fair. The world, the universe, and even God's way of being among us seems much of the time unpredictable and capricious. In the kingdom of God, Jesus says, the last will be first and the first will be last. There doesn't seem much wiggle room for proclaiming "not fair!" and no cosmic or heavenly SEC, federal regulatory commission, congressional hearing, or even a Supreme Court to adjudicate the final decision. Now, who wants a God like that? Arbitrary, it seems, and unable to connect with our notions of fairness to the point that our faith in a greater power who loves us might be profoundly shaken.

The deeper challenge that I hear Jesus posing for us his followers, as well as his earliest disciples, is that our notions of fairness often mask our desire to get ahead. And get ahead on entirely the wrong terms and over the wrong things. My inner dialogue often goes

something like this: if only the playing field were *really* level, I could get ahead. Why? Well, because I'm smarter, tougher, and more resilient than a lot of other people. I show up early and I stay late. I take on more. I work harder.

Leveling the playing field, a lot of the time, is really about leveling the playing field *for me*. Fairness is fair only when it gives me an edge, an advantage. So I can show up to the vineyard early and get one of the better-endowed contracts. That's what the landowner means in a profound way in today's parable when he questions the fairness argument; when he asks those who are grumbling because they came early; when he asks them quite simply if they did not receive what they agreed to. They really want to be ahead of those loafers who came late. Because they believe they deserve it more. Today's parable is a stinging indictment of our very human proclivity to justify ourselves, to believe ourselves to be more righteous, more deserving than others, to see ourselves at the front of the line when it comes to God's grace. And one way we do that is by declaring "it ain't fair." Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

[Today's parable] sounds quite different from the end of the line, after all, than it does from the front of the line, but isn't it interesting that 99 percent of us hear it from front row seats? *We* are the ones who have gotten the short end of the stick; *we* are the ones who have been gypped. We are the ones who have gotten up early and worked hard and stayed late and all for what? So that some backward householder can come along and start at the wrong end of the line, treating us just like the ne'er do wells who do not even get dressed until noon!ⁱ

So does that archetypal CEO with the \$20 million deserve what he gets any more than his co-worker elsewhere in the company who lost everything? The world's answer might be yes and it might be no, or it might wash its hands of the matter and call it capitalism or the risks and rewards of the marketplace. Maybe we could delve deep into the personal history of each person and the string of choices that led one to the top of the corporate ladder and the other one into a more obscure, less financially secure position. Or we might push it back a layer and talk about their education, or their opportunities growing up, or their parents' examples. How far back would we go? Where would we stop? But maybe, given today's Gospel, we're asking the wrong questions.

It might be more true, Jesus argues to us out of today's parable, to recognize that we all came into this life with nothing, and we leave it with nothing. . . save, of course, the real wage that God has promised. And to understand that wage, look at what happens, my sisters and brothers. . . when we come to the altar for Eucharist. Each of us, no matter where we appear on the socio-economic spectrum; whether we won, lost, or drew even this week; whether we work hard or enjoy leisure more; whether we deserve it or not; even whether we've been good or bad or indifferent. . . each of us approaches the altar and receives exactly the same wage: the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Christ crucified and risen for us. For that is where our true identity resides. Not in our portfolios or positions. Not in the stature of our work or our status in community. Trust me, don't let the nice clothes, the snazzy titles, or the high pulpit fool you. The last will be first and the first will be last. It's the world that measures in terms of economic prowess and political power. God's realm looks at human value and identity through a radically different lens than do we much of the time.

Paul's Letter to the church in Philippi caps today's Gospel message with this little tidbit: neither our life, nor our death, is as important as Christ's life in us. Full stop. It's that resurrected life in Christ that can help us turn to one another in these tumultuous times and hold each other up. Christ's life in us can lead us out into a world that is struggling and suffering in the present chaos. . . lead us out into it with renewed purpose, where we live no longer for ourselves, but for God's Creation, God's People, and a world in need of hope. A purpose that transcends Wall Street and Main Street, and lives wherever compassion renews our humanity; leaving behind the fairness argument and instead working for justice: and that is whatever restores relationship, human dignity, and community. And in doing so, that life in Christ guides us and nourishes us through the uncharted wilderness and leads us, together, towards the Promised Land.

Amen.

ⁱ From "Beginning at the End" in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons from the Episcopal Series of the Protestant Radio Hour* by Barbara Brown Taylor (Forward Movement Publications, 1990).