

**Lectionary 25 Year A 2020**  
**September 20, 2020**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our gospel story this morning feels deeply and disturbingly unfair. Jesus tells a story about a landowner with a vineyard. It starts out as one might expect, this landowner goes out early in the morning to hire day workers and agrees to pay them the usual wage. But then something unusual happens: the owner goes back out later in the day to hire more day laborers. Nothing in the story seems to indicate that he needed more laborers, instead he seems to hire them simply because they are there. He agrees to pay them “what is fair” and they go to work in the vineyard. And then the landowner goes back out a *third* time and finds yet more laborers. He sends them into his vineyard without any kind of agreement for pay. Then, when it is time for the workers to be paid, every worker gets paid the same amount no matter how long they worked. But when the workers hired at the beginning of the day voice their—and for that matter our—concerns, saying, “That’s not fair!” the landowner’s response is basically, “Why do you care?”

It’s a good question, why should those laborers care? The first workers were paid a perfectly fair and reasonable amount. It’s exactly what they agreed upon when the day started, and it’s not even their money. If they were the only workers hired, they would have agreed that their wage was perfectly fair.

But when you add in people who only worked half a day or even only an hour, our sense of fairness tells us that those who worked longer should get paid more. Of course, that’s the way it usually is in our society: most of these types of jobs are paid by the hour, and so the wages would reflect how much time each individual worked. It’s only fair, right? That’s certainly how the first workers view the situation. They tell the landowner point blank what’s wrong: “you have made them equal to us.” But the landowner isn’t interested in arguing. He tells the workers to take the wage they agreed upon and go. It’s none of their business what he does with the workers hired later. In response to the first workers’ complaints, he basically says, “So what?”

So what?! But it’s not fair! What this landowner has done offends our sense of right and wrong, our sense of what’s fair. Our world has pretty clear ideas about these things and we are taught these ideas from a very young age. The core of this complaint, the core unfairness is that the last hour workers have been “made equal” to the first hour workers. Equal in pay, equal in recognition, equal in respect. And the first workers simply can’t handle it. These first workers are upset because they hold the same philosophy of fairness that we do.

C.S. Lewis in his book, The Screwtape Letters, describes this philosophy best. In the book, Uncle Screwtape, a senior tempter demon, is guiding his nephew Wormwood, a first-time tempter demon, in the attempted corruption of a human soul. In his 18th letter, Screwtape lays out the Philosophy of Hell. The whole Philosophy of Hell rests on the idea that one thing is not another thing, and, especially, that one self is not another self. They are not equal, they are not the same. My good is my good, and your good is yours. What one gains another loses. “To be,” to exist, *means* “to be in competition.” In other words, in order for me to gain an advantage or benefit, someone else has to lose an advantage or benefit.

We see this clearly in our gospel story. If the last hour workers are paid the same as the first—for the last hour workers to gain equality—it must come at the expense of the first workers, according to the Philosophy of Hell. For one group to gain, another group must lose. The last workers have gained additional pay, and the first workers believe that they have lost additional pay. They have become equals, even though the work was not equal. This is the

Philosophy of Hell. It requires winners and losers, it's only fair. For one person to experience something good, it must come at the cost of another.

The problem is that we often hold this same philosophy. The Philosophy of Hell ties right into our ideas of fairness, and our concerns that there's not enough of anything to go around. You might remember 2015 when our nation's laws were changed to allow same-sex marriage. This created a time of tension in churches—including ours—as we determined how to move forward. One of the comments that was going around that troubles and saddens me to this day is probably one you've heard before too. Someone opposed to our congregation's openness told me, "Well, if same sex couples can get married, it makes my marriage less special and meaningful." What a sad and limited outlook this person had on the world and on their own life! This person believed their marriage was valuable not because of their relationship with their partner, but because it gave them something that others could not have. And there it is, my friends: The Philosophy of Hell, right in today's world. This person believed that if same sex couples gained marriage equality, then it must come at the cost of other marriages. There simply *had* to be winners and losers. (*pause*)

In this time of unrest in our country today, the Christian life calls for justice—not fairness. Christianity calls for justice for oppressed communities, communities of color, and immigrant, refugee, and indigenous communities. But the Philosophy of Hell would convince us that justice and equality for them means diminishing us. It tells us that for these communities to gain, others, perhaps even we, must lose, and so we'd better be careful.

And these aren't new ideas. We see it in our gospel reading and in the story of Jonah. The Philosophy of Hell has been around for thousands of years. Our problem with the gospel this morning is *not* that it endorses the Philosophy of Hell. The offensiveness of our gospel today (and every Sunday) is that it *rejects* the Philosophy of Hell. When our God, the great landowner, the land maker, in fact, is paying for our justice, our equality, our salvation, the gains are for everyone. The gains are for the least and the lost and the forgotten as well as the high and mighty and righteous and memorable. God's gifts are for us *and* them. God's gifts are for all, and there are no losers, no exclusions.

For C.S. Lewis, the Philosophy of Hell is one of hunger and emptiness, needing to devour and destroy, needing to gain but only able to do so by taking from others. The Philosophy of Heaven, while never called such in The Screwtape Letters, is the opposite. The Philosophy of Heaven—God's kingdom—is one of fullness to bursting, a fullness of love that can never run out, a life of uplifting rather than destroying, a life of empowering rather than devouring. The Philosophy of Hell is an emptiness that can never be filled, but the Philosophy of Heaven is a fullness that can never be emptied.

God calls us today to the Philosophy of Heaven. To a life of abundance rather than scarcity, a life of unity rather than division. We are called to a life of justice rather than mere fairness. We are called to a life of justice that sees the good of the least, and the lost, and the last, as good for all. We are called to a worldview that sees "injustice anywhere," as Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "as a threat to justice everywhere." We are called to a life of fullness that lets us celebrate with the very last in our society when true justice and equality approaches. We are called to a life of fullness that overflows from our God, bringing salvation as it fills each one of us, and justice and peace as it spreads to all the ends of the earth. Thanks be to God. Amen.