



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
24 September 2017
Sermon: "Getting in Line"
Rev. Samantha González-Block

Jonah 3:10-4:11
Matthew 20:1-16

As a child growing up in a soccer-loving town in New Jersey, virtually all of my friends were great athletes. There were dozens of soccer leagues for every age and on the weekends parks were pretty much packed with back-to-back games.

Now, my siblings and I are the product of two top-notch athletes, and my parents did their best to get us involved at an early age in just about anything and everything. Unfortunately, by the age of eight I already had a sense that my most promising position was probably team "sub". I seemed to lack a bit of that competitive spirit.

During any big game, you would never see me aggressively trying to steal the ball or kicking it with a fury down the field. No, my focus was more on... the interpersonal - making a new friend or two, checking in to see if everyone was enjoying themselves, finding out what we all had in common with the other team.

I took my self-designated position very seriously and to my surprise it wasn't always fully appreciated by my teammates, or my coach, or any of the parents. I certainly wasn't pulling my weight in the ways that they would have expected.

But when it came time for the trophy ceremony, I was faster than ever. I hurried on up - in my pristine purple uniform and newly polished cleats - to the front of the line to proudly receive my hard-earned reward! My teammates were less than thrilled. In their eyes this wasn't fair - I hadn't put in the same effort that they did. But for me, I had done my part just fine! I'd filled in a role that no one else wanted: "*team chaplain.*"

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The issue of *fairness* is probably one of the first things in life that we feel really passionate about. Looking around, we know that the majority of our earliest arguments center around fairness: "I was sitting there first", "this cookie is mine", "I was waiting here longer", "you promised me!" *You know what I'm talking about!*

And it doesn't stop there, for the adults in the room, we know that fairness continues to be a major player throughout our lives:
from check-out lines to bonus checks,
from parking spots to parking tickets,
from rejection letters to divorce papers,
from broken bones to broken hearts.

It can sometimes feel that no matter how hard we try,
or how patiently we wait, or how faithful we live:
life just *ain't fair*. *Where's the hope in that?*

I don't know about y'all, but this week the world has felt particularly *unfair*.
I have found myself uttering the words "Now What?" quite a lot – often out loud and often
coming from a place of total exasperation. Flipping the TV "on and off" it has been hard to
keep up with the next wave of breaking news:
a tumultuous United Nations General Assembly,
a new victim to gun violence,
another earthquake in Mexico,
another hurricane battering the Caribbean,
a stalemate yet to be resolved between our local hospital and a major insurance company.

Sifting through all of these headlines, as well the headlines of our own lives,
I know that many of us have been left feeling bewildered, anxious, fired up, depleted.
In this week where so many millions have lost power, surely we have found ourselves
turning to the "all-powerful" to ask, "How is Your mercy and justice at work in all of this?
Why does this world always have to feel so utterly unfair?"

~

Today's text invites us into one of Jesus' most mindboggling parables where *fairness* is
certainly in question – in fact the apparent lack of "it" is somehow a depiction of "the
kingdom of God."

We find ourselves in a vineyard. It's the end of a long day. A group of laborers are finishing
their work and a land manager is counting out their pay. Some of them have been in the
field since sunrise, others since the late morning and afternoon, and a few more only just
recently recruited. As they rest their shovels and pruning shears down, the manager lines
everyone up oddly beginning with those who arrived last, and he pays each of them - the
very same amount.

Interesting, this manager could have just as easily asked the folks who arrived first to
receive their daily wage and then *happily* be on their way. *No one would have been the
wiser*. But for some reason he *wants* the laborers to *see* what everyone is getting paid. He
wants them to *react* to it. And they certainly do! The early birds grumble in protest. And the
late comers are amazed.

Looking around the room, I know that this congregation is always one that is willing to step
up to the plate. We take pride in working in our garden, serving on committees,
volunteering throughout our city. So, I can imagine that many of us can relate to those full-
day laborers. They had faithfully served since the early morning - wouldn't it have been
"right and good" to simply award everyone their "fair share"?

But when we look at the text closely, we see that that there is a deeper concern stirring
beneath the surface. A concern that goes well-beyond the issue of just-right economics:
The laborers protest to their landowner: *'These last folks worked only one hour! And you
have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day - and the scorching heat.'*

“You have made them equal to us,” they say. Their real concern isn’t correct compensation for all, but rather that ‘the established social order ‘ is now at risk. These full-day laborers were accustomed to a certain sense of privilege.

They were always the first picked for work,
they had polished skills and a stellar reputation,
they knew the system: which landowners to avoid and which to trust.
And at the end of the day, they could always count on having food on the table.

They depended on this privilege – on their premier spot in line. Lifting up those who came late that day as *equals* meant that they would no longer be seen as *better*.

This deep-seated fear of upsetting the status quo and the social order of things is something that we see play out again and again:

in the ways we ‘talk about and treat’ black and brown bodies,
in the laws we make regarding LGBTQ rights and voting zones,
in the stigmas we give to those living without homes here in our city,
and in the fearful rhetoric surrounding undocumented immigrants.

We often treat the idea of protecting fairness as an excuse for maintaining “sameness”: a trickle-down system – an established line - where there are winners and there are losers. Indeed, in this parable, Jesus challenges the world as we know it today.

~

Eighteen-year-old Vanessa Martinez grew up in the United States. She was a promising student with the smarts and the drive to go to college, where she dreamed of studying Forensic Science. But her whole world changed when she learned that she was missing one important document: her US citizenship.

When she looked into her options, she was told that she should simply return to Mexico (a place where she had no memories of ever living) and there she should “get in line” with everyone else and re-enter the country legally.

This “line” that she would be waiting on would take more than twenty years (our government is still processing requests from 1995). So, she was left thinking that there would be no way for her to thrive - school and a good job were out of the question.

When DACA, the policy that would offer work permits and deferred deportation came along a few years ago, she put her faith in the system and shared all of her information with the government in order to apply. Now a freshman in college, working at Burger King to pay the bills, she worries that this policy could soon be rescinded. Her dreams taken away from her once again.

She explains: “The government has all of my family’s documents. They know where we live and we don’t know what’s going to happen next. I am a human being too, you know. It’s not like I’m a different species. This is my home but now it’s difficult for me to think about the future. We’ll see...I try to be hopeful.”¹

~

Like Vanessa Martinez, not all of us can relate to those full-day laborers – the ones who had always been seen as more valuable.

But I wonder what would happen if we all imagined ourselves in the shoes of those who arrived late to the vineyard that day. I'm not talking about those 9am workers or the ones who came at noon, but the group that arrived at 5pm and worked for just one hour.

Those who were standing around the market all day – waiting, hoping to be called upon. They weren't there because they were lazy or incapable, they were waiting for hours because "*no one would hire them.*"

Maybe they were the wrong gender, or skin color, or age,
maybe they couldn't speak the language,
or they didn't have a clean record,
maybe their bodies were disfigured in some way,
maybe their papers weren't in order.

And then I wonder how it felt for them to be asked to the vineyard,
to get their hands deep in the dirt for one wondrous hour,
and then to be invited to stand at the front of the line,
and to be paid a full day's wage.

For the late-comers, this moment is not an issue of fairness, this is unabashed good news. For the first time in forever, they feel hope – the taste of what it's like to be first in line, to have someone look them in the eyes and see them as human beings – *equally* worthy of dignity and security, a warm meal, and a place to rest their head at night.

I guess this parable isn't really concerned with fairness at all - because God isn't fair - God is radically generous. To assume fairness is to assume scarcity, but when it comes to the Lord there is only abundance. There is more than enough grace to go around.

The landowner asks: Are you envious because I am generous?

Maybe we do feel envy because we like to think that we know exactly where we stand. We come to church. We say our prayers. We sing with passion. *Doesn't that get us something?*

But when it comes to God, we can't "do what we do" in hopes of being rewarded. *Because you know what?* We have no idea where we stand in line. And that's not bad news. That's unabashed good news!

No matter if we are life-long Presbyterians or if we are just dipping our toes in,
no matter if we've always walked the "straight and narrow" or we've had our fair share of stumbles along the way,
wherever we stand, God meets us there, looks us in the eyes and sees us as equal to one another, and calls us to see each other- just that way as well.

~

As a child, I remember my grandmother Luci singing songs about Puerto Rico – songs of nostalgia for the island and its city that she once called home:

*En mi viejo San Juan
Cuantos sueños forjé
En mis años de infancia
Mi primera ilusión
y mis cuitas de amor
Son recuerdos del alma*

*Una tarde me fuí
hacia a extraña nación
Pues lo quiso el destino
Pero mi corazón
Se quedo frente al mar
En mi viejo San Juan*

Today, so much of this sweet island, this commonwealth of the United States, is partly underwater and without power after this most recent destructive hurricane. With rescue workers stretched so thin, people of all backgrounds from across the island and beyond are coming together to rebuild.

A rescue worker being interviewed this week said: “The San Juan of yesterday doesn’t exist anymore. In the months and years to come, we need everyone’s help – young and old, rich and poor - we will build a new San Juan together.”

~

Friends, in time that too often feels so *unfair*,
a time where there are clear winners and losers,
a time where society tells us where we belong in line,
this parable reminds us that it is not our job to assume where we stand,
but to simply ask the question: *NOW WHAT?*

And God responds with this parable –
this story of how *if* we have the courage to see each other as equally beloved,
then together we can construct a new kind of society – a true kingdom of heaven.

A kingdom not focused on merit, or status, or playing by the rules,
but one where the “first are last”, and the “last are first,”
where we stand on equal footing - each gift and difference cherished,
where God’s “grace” and God’s “covenant” can be felt by all,
and where there is more than enough “radical generosity” to go around.

There is a vineyard waiting – and we are being called to it together.

ⁱ *Vida Diferida (Life, Deferred)*. Brenda Avila-Hanna. New Day Films, 2017.
<http://dreamerdocs.com/vida-diferida-life-deferred/>