

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart
Gospel Reading: Matthew 20:1-16
September 20, 2020



Holy One, may these words be your words.
And if they are not, then let these clever people
hear in them what you would have them hear.
Amen.

This weekend some friends and family began a new year. Sundown on Friday marked the start of Rosh Hoshannah, the first of ten days of reflection and repentance that culminate in Yom Kippur, one week from today.

Amid these High Holy days in the Jewish tradition, akin to the solemnity of our Christian Triduum, it feels ironic that our gospel reading from Matthew confronts us with the notorious parable of Jesus from which comes the classic catchphrase: “the first will be last and the last will be first.”

That word—notorious—cannot help but summon the legacy of one who embodied grit and grace in equal measure, an iconic giant of American jurisprudence known for the gravitas of her dissenting lace collar, the second female appointed to the highest court in this land. Not to name her today would be unimaginable.

The Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsberg, aleha hashalom—may she rest in peace—is a name undoubtedly written in the Book of Life, though we could debate whether that much loved nickname by which she was known to many, “notorious RBG,” also made it into that eternal inscription.

Described by some as a dainty, demure firebrand, the unforgettable Ginsberg, flourished in the face of adversity, even through her final earthly years. She relentlessly championed justice and equality under the law for all, especially for those who previously had not enjoyed such provisions and protections.

All Saints' Episcopal Church
634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308
Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796
allsaintsatlanta.org

Justice Ginsberg often is remembered for her contributions to landmark achievements paving the way for fair pay for women workers, reaffirming the constitutionality of protecting voter rights in this nation, and extending marriage privileges to the LGBTQ community. But another case in her monumental track-record affords us a useful lens for grappling with today's gospel: *Epic Systems Corp. v. Lewis*, a worker rights case that came before the Supreme Court in 2018, is one of the cases in which Justice Ginsberg wrote the dissenting opinion.

The decision in that ruling, in which Ginsberg and her fellow dissenting justices were in the minority, upheld labor contracts compelling worker grievances to be resolved via individual arbitration, without any other collective options for seeking redress. It may come as no surprise that Ginsberg thought this outcome “egregiously wrong.”

Historical imbalance of power existed, Ginsberg explained, in prevailing economic conditions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Such realities essentially forced workers to take up employment on whatever terms were dictated by employers. Gradually, as employees worked in concert for their mutual benefit, employers began pushing back.

Strong-arm tactics like the “yellow dog contract,” prohibited workers from joining unions as a condition of employment, and even required them to refrain from any associative activities in seeking to address labor grievances. These “take it or leave it” arbitration clauses effectively left workers on shakier footing than federal labor laws—that had sought to remedy those circumstances in subsequent years—intended.

Such a “yellow dog contract” dispute is not what we find underpinning the exchange between workers and landowner in Matthew's Gospel. But there are grievances aplenty in that manager's office, as paychecks get distributed. I can't help imagining Ginsberg's five-foot shadow just offstage of our encounter with the laborers in Jesus' parable this morning, urging us to attend carefully to its details.

It's safe to say the workers are “seeing green,” from the last few to arrive at the worksite, whose eyes widen in joyful wonder at their lucky payday, to the earliest workers who collect last, grumbling at the disparity of these desserts. Their dissent makes clear they feel entitled to a higher payout. Even the landowner names their envy of generosity dealt to the latecomers. Hadn't they been the ones to bear the brunt of the work? Surely their sweat equity is not something to scorn!

Yet those who worked only an hour are paid the very same sum. This unprecedented move on the part of their employer evokes their vehement objection: “You have made them equal to us!” That equal sign is a tell-tale symbol on which truth hinges, regardless of whether we’re talking human or mathematical relationships. Here the kingdom comes crashing in. For, as scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds, Scripture is never neutral.

This story about the kingdom of heaven indeed makes the case for a relational reality that affirms the equality God intends, here and now. Equality that translates to equity, including access to employment and wages. Equity that reshapes social outcomes. This is what we see in the vineyard owner’s decision to give certain workers an economic boost, regardless of the number of hours they worked.

Like so many of Jesus’ parables, aiming to bring the kingdom of heaven to life for his followers, this story leaves us puzzled. Because equity in the kingdom of heaven does not always feel like a fair shake. For God, equity involves rebalancing human systems of power, status, and influence. The Greenlining Institute’s definition of equity draws this out more concretely: “Equity refers to resources and the need to provide additional or alternative resources so that all groups can reach comparable, favorable outcomes.”

Our own society’s inequalities of outcome are especially revealed in the disparity of resources in this nation. From workforces and supply chains to availability of essential resources for building wealth like healthcare and mortgages, communities of color in our country have suffered the greatest levels of inequalities, in both resources and outcomes, in the past and in the present.

The Aspen Institute’s 2019 Roundtable on Community Change notes how pursuing such equity in society “demands that we pay attention not just to individual-level discrimination, but to overall social outcomes.” At the end of the day, Jesus’ vineyard parable shows us what paying attention means, through God’s practical addressing of systemic inequities, in order to shift social outcomes in the world of the story just as surely as in our own.

What’s at stake in the story extends far deeper than the wage dispute that shows up in discourse between laborers and landowner. Jesus is attending to the state of our hearts, as we choose whether we will embrace or resist the equity, inclusion, and diversity that characterize the reign of God.

Not unlike us, the vineyard workers want to be valued, for what they each bring to the enterprise. Like us, some also feel disoriented and disappointed by changes they witness unfolding, changes that dismantle privilege, power, and status certain individuals and groups long enjoyed.

Those first-paid may have felt fortunate to work when others could not. Perhaps they even made a beeline to pay that windfall forward, I can imagine their gratitude fueling compassionate action to address the needs of the vulnerable in their communities, especially those touched by the shadows of natural disaster, illness, and death.

It would be a stretch to see those disgruntled vineyard workers worried about the less resourced and more precariously positioned, unless we construe “worry” as perceiving the others as potential threats. A more generous hermeneutic, leaves me hoping personal transformation happened. It just happened to take a bit longer for them.

Like all those workers in this vineyard parable we know the meaning of a billable hour. Time is money, after all. And day by day we leverage carefully skills and resources to maximize opportunities in our spheres of influence. We do well when we pay attention to the collaborative orbit into which God is drawing us, alongside proximate fellow laborers. That is where this vineyard of the Lord reveals how to monetize diverse assets to serve the greater good in our day.

As today’s parable illustrates, that final payday for which we all await is likely to up-end our habits and expectations. The virtues of this particular vineyard can always be debated or defied. But, the kingdom of heaven is coming. With clockwork precision reflected in the landowner’s own rhythms, going out again and again and again as he does, we see in this story that God does not falter when structuring abundant—perhaps even infinite—onramps for us all. Whether we decide to be among those who enter the vineyard at daybreak or barely make it before the workday is up, we all are invited to contribute sweat equity.

I’ve heard folks joke that an eternal God has nothing but time, but that we, alas, only have one short life to live. Like the legendary and even notorious RBG, may we, too, spend every awesome minute we are granted, from the first to the very last, paving pathways of justice and equality, and dissenting vehemently to every priority but God’s. For God will not stop until equity, diversity, and inclusion is achieved for us all, especially all who have not yet tasted the kingdom’s fruits.

Amen.