

A Courageous Life: Courage to Do Justice
16th Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ Matthew 20:1-16
Welborne UMC ~ September 24, 2017
F. Elizabeth Givens

When we are baptized into the church, or bring our children for baptism, we are asked several questions, called our baptismal vows. The second of those vows goes like this:

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves?¹

Let's let that sink in. As baptized Christians, we have accepted that God gives us the power to resist evil, injustice, and oppression, no matter how we encounter them in the world. That's a weighty task. I will be honest and say that if I were to carefully examine myself, I expect it is a task that I fall fairly short on.

Resisting injustice and oppression is what this parable is all about. It's a parable that makes a lot of people uncomfortable. I can't help but think that Jesus probably knew that. This parable of the laborers in the vineyard has often been interpreted as an allegory. The gracious landowner hires workers at 7 am, 9 am, noon, 3 pm and 5 pm to work in his vineyard, and then gives them all exactly the same pay. Allegorically, the gracious landowner represents God. The pay that is given represents salvation. The workers who arrived early are the Jewish people, who have been following God for years. The workers who arrive late—but still get salvation—are the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people, who still receive the same payment—salvation.

But, that is a simple reading, and perhaps also a dangerous reading. The story is a bit more complicated than that. The landowner is powerful, and appears to be generous. But if we look at the story carefully, we discover that the generosity of the landowner is false. By paying everyone equally, the landowner sows division among the laborers. He even makes sure they know about it, because he pays the last hired their wage first. As Karoline Lewis write, "If the goal is really to create equality among the workers, the landowner could do so without making a public display. Apparently, he intends to provoke a reaction. He uses his interaction with first-hired, last-paid workers to declare his own justness and goodness."²

Ultimately, the landowner is reminding the workers that it all belongs to him, and he can do with it what he pleases. You can imagine the fights breaking out back at the work camp that night. And, at the end of the day, has the landowner actually done anything to raise their status? Do they have land? The promise of a job the next day with benefits? No, they have none of this. Would we be happy with this sense of justice? Not likely.

¹ Baptismal Covenant, The United Methodist Hymnal.

² Karoline Lewis, "Commentary on Matthew 20:1-16," www.workingpreacher.org; retrieved 9/20/17.

What is Jesus saying here, if it isn't a simple allegory? To answer that question, let's look at the disciples. Earlier in Matthew, in chapters 18 and 19, they have begun to make noises about their status as Jesus's followers. They continue this later in chapter 20. They are asking what they get for dropping everything to follow him. They are asking who gets to be the greatest, and in just a few verses, James and John will squabble about who sits on Jesus' right and left. It's in this context that Jesus tells this parable, talking right to the disciples, and saying, when we are alienated from one another, when we are alone and cannot be in relationship with our neighbors, this is not justice. True justice brings about wholeness and healed relationships, not enmity and strife.

The question I began asking myself is a question about our city. All these debates about monuments and history, are they really about justice? Or are they about things that it is much easier for us to fuss over instead of digging in to the injustices of our legacy of slavery that still exist—a failing inner city school system, violence that is taking too many lives in our city, poverty that drives all of this. When we look at these questions, monuments become an easy conversation.

A friend guided me to a wonderful Facebook post by the Richmond Cycling Corps. The RCC is a small non-profit in town which uses the sport of cycling to help youth in our public housing projects to break free from the cycle of violence and poverty. On Friday, September 15, the day before last weekend's rally, the RCC took five of their youth, aged 16 and 17, down to the monument to form their own opinions. Daquan, one of the students, wrote a reflection shared on Facebook over twenty thousand times, including on our Welborne page. Here is part of what Daquan wrote:

Everybody pointing blame at monument avenue and statues that reside there, but those statues never did anything to me or people that i care about. The only thing that ever-harmed people in low income areas is the violence that reside there in low income areas.... From the day we are born we are taught nobody cares and that nobody can help. What if i told you that there were kids starving in your backyards living in rundown buildings? What if i told you that there are kids that rather rob, steal and kill rather than going in the house with nothing to eat? The schools we go to are unaccredited and broke meaning everybody young, dumb, and broke. Instead of using money to knock down statues that most people in low income areas never even seen how about using that moving to improve schools, fix up the community that we see everyday, or why not protest in our neighborhoods where we see violence and hate the most.... Everybody wants to help but nobody is really helping are they?"³

Here's the question. How do we really help? How do we as a congregation get involved in real justice, the justice of Jesus, which brings about relationships and healing and wholeness?

³ Facebook post, Richmond Cycling Corps, September 15, 2017 at 5:33 p.m.
<https://www.facebook.com/richmondcyclingscorps/posts/1675381062493444>

Well, we feed people, you say proudly. We have this amazing Food Pantry. And we do. We feed thousands every year. But I am becoming more and more convicted that feeding people is not enough. Feeding people is important, but it doesn't get at the more basic issues of why people need a food pantry. They have lost a job. They are on disability. They are facing major medical bills. They have a criminal record that inhibits their ability to find employment. And on and on and on.

Many times, these problems overwhelm us when we think about them from a systems perspective. How do we solve unemployment, poverty, racism, affordable healthcare? What if instead of tackling them as systems, we tackled them through relationships, one person at a time?

Last year a new national ministry concept came to Richmond called Open Table. Right now, it is being coordinated through United Methodist Family Services, our denominational agency who works with high risk families and children. The Open Table model pairs one person struggling against these unjust systems with a community of people from a congregation. They meet together for a year, weekly, share a meal, develop relationships, and become a community of support to accomplish goals. Take a look at the story of one participant, Jessica.

Video: <https://vimeo.com/195853433>

That's what justice looks like. Not a community of people being divided from one another, but a community of people working together to improve life. A community of people sharing the networking, life knowledge, and resources they have to build a relationship with and a life for another person.

I know. You're thinking, a year, once a week, for an hour. That's a huge time commitment. But what else do we spend an hour a week doing? Scrolling through our Facebook feed? Watching cable news? Playing Pokemon Go or Candy Crush? I don't know about you—but I think God might rather me spend that time on justice.

When I was baptized, my parents promised to teach me how to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. When I was confirmed, I made that promise for myself. I am a part of this Welborne community, where we have made that promise. This seems like one way we might live it out.

I want to invite you to pray with me about this opportunity to be a part of Open Table. I could see us starting with UMFS, but then moving over the years to work with our pantry community. One person at a time. One life at a time. One relationship at a time. Because that is what Jesus is really teaching us in this parable: we need to have the courage to seek true justice, God's justice, justice that leads to wholeness and the healing not only of individual relationships, but of all creation.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.