

Jonah 3: 10-4, 11
Psalm 145: 1-8
Matthew: 20: 1-16
Year A

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Remember pop quizzes in school? Let's try one. When you hear these very familiar words from Jesus—the last shall be first and, well you know, the first shall be last? What do you think?

- a. God's ways are not my ways
- b. That's so unfair
- c. Oh, fantastic

Be honest, really honest. The quiz is pass fail. Of course I can't see a show of hands and I don't have access to the chat box, so, I'm betting most of you said either a. or b. When we're really honest, we often wail at life's unfairness. After years in church, or wanting to ace the quiz, many of us might settle on God's ways not being our ways which is a pretty safe bet. But you who picked "C" "Oh, fantastic", nicely done.

Thinking about this text in the context of these times, I realize how much our reaction to fairness is based in privilege. Working hard is one thing. But success is based on so much else: education, opportunity, safety, security, a relatively stable family life, and a level playing field is. Steeped in the Puritan ethic

as many of us are, we think hard work should lead to rewards and success which for many of us born into white privilege, it does.

But others don't even make it to the starting line: Consider infant mortality in America. According to a Washington Post piece a few months ago, per every 1,000 births, the mortality rate for white babies is 4.7 percent and for African American, babies it's 11 percent, more than double. Maternal mortality is just as grim. For every 100,000 births, the rate of death for white mother is 14.7 percent and for their African American counterparts, it's 37.1 percent.

In terms of education, \$2,200 more is spent on each white student annually in this country than on non-white students. And as many of you are probably already aware, Blacks are killed by police in this country at twice the rate of whites.

I could go on, but I think you see my point: there is a deep and long overdue reckoning underway in this country which requires all of us to learn, understand, pray, and change, especially those of us who were born into privilege. Most of us should have little to say about the unfairness of life because we're pretty near the head of the line.

God's ways are clearly not our ways. That's a given, right? A safe bet. This parable is not about God's fairness, but about God's generosity. Just as in the

Prodigal son. If you ever sided with the elder brother, the first born, who played by the rules and did everything right, it seems *so unfair* that the reckless, spendthrift, often drunk younger son was welcomed home with a lavish feast and joy, no questions asked. Totally unfair. But generous? Spectacularly.

If you picked option “c”, “Oh, fantastic!” you might appreciate what it’s like to sometimes find yourself in that other 1 percent, the 1 percent no one wants to be in. The 1 percent used to being at the short end of the stick. Crushed, defeated, overwhelmed, bottomed out, unsure if the tide will ever turn, trying to catch a break. You’re not expecting fairness if you’ve never had any. You’re looking for hope.

Who isn’t looking for hope these days? More than 200,000 Americans have died from Covid, the ravages of climate change are seen in fires and floods, and racial unrest in response to police violence continues to tear at the soul of our nation.

These are anxious, overwhelming times. In his sermon to the House of Bishops this week, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry reminds us that we are “people of faith” not “fate.” We are deeply divided, he said, and the wounds are deep. There is no quick fix. But we have to start somewhere. The election is 44 days away and while the Episcopal Church does not endorse candidates from either

party, Bishop Curry reminds us that “partisan neutrality does not mean moral neutrality” adding, “Voting is an act of moral agency. It is an act of moral discernment and decision. It is how a community or a nation decides how the moral values that it holds and shapes public policy and the lives of people. The children of God.”

“The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent that you have in a democratic society,” wrote John Lewis days before he died.

And when the Voting Rights act that Lewis helped bring into being after being beaten nearly to death in Selma, Alabama, was gutted by the Supreme Court in 2013, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg famously dissented, correctly warned that the decision would increase voter suppression in the country which happened almost immediately.

Like Lewis, Ginsburg, who died on Friday at 87, was a bonfire of hope, a fierce and relentless fighter for gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and insuring that all American are guaranteed equal protection under the law.

As a lawyer, and arguing the first of the six gender discrimination cases she would bring to the Supreme Court Standing, (and she would win 5) Ginsburg said, “I ask no favor for my sex. All I ask of our brethren is that they take their feet off

our necks,” quoting Sarah Grimke, a 19th century abolitionist and women’s rights activist.

There is a through line from Jesus, our gospel this morning, John Lewis and Justice Ginsburg.

What was radical about Jesus was that he upended the existing order. He poured out his life for those at the back of the line; the poor, forgotten, weak and despised. “Love your neighbor like yourself,” “Feed my sheep,” “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do unto me.” These are our marching orders. We’re called to action as his followers, to stir up trouble, “good trouble”, in the words of John Lewis.

When President Bill Clinton nominated Ginsburg to the Supreme Court in 1993, he praised Ginsburg for standing with the “the outsider in society ... telling them that they have a place in our legal system, by giving them a sense that the Constitution and the laws protect all the American people, not simply the powerful.”

Ginsburg attributed her outsider perspective to her Jewish roots, pointing often to her heritage as foundational to her approach on the bench.

“The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people,” Ginsburg often said, quoting Justice Louis Brandeis, and urging people “to fight for the things you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.”

She took her own advice. In arguing one of her first discrimination cases before the then all male Supreme Court, the secretary typing her brief pointed out she kept saying “sex, sex, sex,” in referring to discrimination which would distract the male judges on the court. Ginsburg agreed and from then on, she fought against *gender* discrimination.

Judge Ginsburg died at home on Friday evening from metastatic pancreatic cancer, surrounded by her loving family on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, a High Holiday that commemorates the Jewish New Year. According to Jewish tradition, one who dies on the High Holiday is considered a “Tzadik” a title given in Judaism to those considered righteous.

The outpouring of support for Judge Ginsburg has been stunning. In the first two hours after her death, 12.5 million dollars poured into Act Blue raised to honor her legacy – that \$100k a minute. The woman who graduated first in her class from Columbia law school in 1959 and then couldn’t get a job because of her gender never quit trying, persisting against every obstacle put in her path with a tenacious fortitude, integrity, and an unwavering commitment to equality.

Like John Lewis, she knew that when the founding fathers wrote about “We the People” in the Declaration of Independence, it was, in reality, more philosophical than inclusive. By 1787, at the Constitutional Convention, African Americans were considered 3/5^{ths} human. Women had no rights. We weren’t at the end of the line; women and people of color weren’t even in the line.

While reading one of her dissents in court, Ginsburg said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice, quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., But it only bends that way, she went on, “If there is a steadfast commitment to see the task through to completion.”

The legacies of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and John Lewis belongs to us now. Their fight is our fight.

As people of “faith, not fate” we need to remember that voting, in the words of Bishop Curry, is an act of “moral agency.”

Voting has never mattered more. If you wear a wedding band and are gay, that right came down to one vote on the Supreme Court. If you have health insurance because of the Affordable Care Act a 5-4 decision in the Supreme Court gave you that right and protects pre-existing conditions.

One election won’t make the last first. But it will decide the future of the Court for generations. Vote to make sure all of us are standing together in the

same line, as Americans, with equal rights protected by law. AMEN

law. AMEN