

“IT JUST ISN’T FAIR!”

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 20, 2020

Exodus 16:2-15 ~ Philippians 1:21-30 ~ Matthew 20:1-16

I had a pretty tough week last week ... nothing earth shattering, but it seemed like everything I was looking forward to never happened and everything I was dreading arrived right on schedule. By the end of the week, I was stressed ... I was whining ... I threw myself a little pity party and asked, “Why me?” Even my prayers had an angry edge and I told God a thing or two. I let God know that I try really hard to be a good person ... that I try to be kind to everybody ... that I try to make this world a better place for generations to come. So why should these awful things happen to me? It just isn’t fair!

But then I thought of all the people truly suffering in the world like and I felt differently. It didn’t make me feel better ... it just made me feel guilty for feeling sorry for myself! I have learned it doesn’t matter how intense our suffering may actually be, at any given moment most of us feel like we have just a little more trouble than we can stand. You’ve probably heard the expression, “God won’t ever give you more than you can handle.” Well, I think that at times God has seriously overestimated my skill set. I don’t have all the answers. Life is a mystery to me. I want to believe God is good and just, but sometimes it’s hard to see it. The truth is ... life just isn’t fair.

You can blame it on evil, I suppose. Much of the injustice of the world comes from greedy people wielding power against others. So much violence! Whole populations are abused by the few who lord it over them ... not so they will have enough, but so they can have it all. Millions of lives could be saved if the haves of the world were willing to share with the have-nots, but they won’t. We won’t. No doubt about it ... one of the chief reasons that life isn’t fair is because people are selfish, and that’s evil.

But evil alone cannot explain why life isn’t fair. People don’t choose where they are born. People don’t choose the circumstances in which they live. A lot of unfairness in life seems built in ... just the way things are. And who made the world the way it is? ... God did. How can *that* be? I believe in God. I believe that God is good. But the providence of God transcends morality. Jesus told us that “The rain falls on the just and the unjust.” Likewise, ... and this may be the

hardest lesson of all for us religious, churchgoing folk to accept ... the grace of God transcends morality, too.

I say it's the hardest lesson because frankly, there are some people we wish God wouldn't forgive. I have my list. It includes Adolf Hitler and anyone who was ever mean to my children. Don't you have yours? (I hope I'm not on yours!) But we don't get to choose whom God forgives or favors. That was Jesus' point with Peter in our scripture today.

Jesus was teaching his disciples about the dominion of God, when Peter asked him, "Master, what will our reward be? We have left our home and family behind. We have worked hard, we have suffered much, we have followed faithfully, we have sacrificed significantly, so when do we get what's coming to us?"

Jesus told Peter not to expect much on this side of the grave ... he confirms faith in God's justice after death ... but not altogether. Instead, he tells a parable. It's a familiar one to me, or at least the setting is, because it's a scene I saw each morning in San Antonio, Texas. Transients and the homeless and people down on their luck would wait under the overpass on Interstate 10 for folks to drive by and offer them some odd job for a day so they could eat and maybe get a place to stay for the night. It was the union hall of unskilled laborers ... you can find a spot like that in any large city. Think about just such a place as you hear the story that Jesus told.

A contractor sends his foreman down to that overpass at 6 a.m. to pick up some day laborers, promising them a fair day's wage, let's say, \$100 a day. They start early in the morning. At lunch time the foreman goes back down under the overpass and picks up some more help. Finally, around four o'clock, as they're about to wrap up the day, the foreman drives back again. He sees a few lonely souls still standing around. "Why are you standing around?" he asks them. "Why aren't you working?" "Nobody asked us to," they say. "Hop in," he says. They get there in time to help with a few finishing touches.

The whistle blows at 5 o'clock. The hands gather to get their pay. Those who came last gather around the foreman first, probably because they have the energy to get there the fastest. They only worked for an hour. And he pays them \$100! Now that's a good wage! The midday crew comes, and he pays them \$100, too. And the rest are thinking, "What gives here? How much will we get?" Finally, the guys who started early and worked a full day get exactly what

they were promised, no more and no less - \$100. “Boss’s orders,” the foreman explains.

Naturally, these guys are livid. It just isn’t fair! Those other guys came later and worked less so they were paid the same as me?! They don’t deserve it. They go directly to the contractor to complain. And the contractor says, “Hey! Who’s the boss here? You were paid as promised. What is it to you if I decide to be generous with those other guys? Don’t you think they need the money, too?”

It’s an uncomfortable parable for us hard-working religious folk to hear. It assails our faith in God’s justice ... but from the grace side, it means that God’s grace is as indiscriminate as the rain. It falls wherever God chooses. It means God is in charge and we’re not. It means when somebody new joins the church, they have just as much voice in what the church does as the folks who have been laboring here for fifty years. It means the latecomers to the faith are just as beloved of God as those we consider saints and martyrs. It means the folks who live for years on the wild and woolly edge of life and come around to God at the very last moment get the same eternal reward as the folks who fly the straight and narrow across decades. It means the worst drug abuser in the state prison gets the same eternal grace as Mother Teresa of Calcutta. That’s outrageous, isn’t it? God just isn’t fair because grace isn’t fair!

You see, the grace of God doesn’t come in small portions. In fact, grace doesn’t come in portions at all. God only has one thing to give us, and that is God’s own self, and God is not divisible. So, God just isn’t fair. Thank God, God isn’t fair.

I once went on a mission trip to Biloxi, Ms. and spent a week at our UCC mission there, Back Bay. I drove down with some folks from my church in Wisconsin, and we spent the first night somewhere in Tennessee. We got up early the next morning and had breakfast at a little café. When our breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast arrived it was accompanied by grits. My friend explained to our waitress that she hadn’t ordered grits, and the waitress said, “Well bless your heart honey, grits just comes.” Grace is just like grits ... it just comes.

And grace is intrinsically unjust because it means we don’t get what we deserve. Instead, we get what the generous heart of God has to offer us because we are God’s children. Grace is not based upon the work we do and the quality of our character, but upon the quality of God’s character and the endless love that God gives us. Grace just comes ... and it is pure gift.

Now, don't jump to the wrong conclusion here. This parable doesn't mean you should go bug nuts ... play around to the last minute ... and then turn to God. Just ask someone who has come to God after a long life of sowing wild oats, and they will talk about the life they wasted ... the people they hurt ... and the sorrow they feel that they didn't serve God sooner. Nevertheless, you will see that they have received the same gift as all the others ... the sure knowledge of God's love ... God's forgiveness ... and God's sustaining presence. And it's often a greater joy to them because, unlike us, they realize how much they don't deserve it.

Sure, the injustice of God can work against us when it comes to Providence, the rain falling on the just and the unjust. But it decidedly works in our favor when it comes to mercy. We don't get what we deserve. God has not set in place some mechanistic system with an automatic response ... do right and you're rewarded ... do wrong and you're punished. With a system like that we wouldn't need God, would we? We wouldn't call upon God. We wouldn't love God or feel loved by God. But God is not some mechanistic robot, and God did not make us robots.

Life is a mystery. As Frederick Buechner says, it is comedy and tragedy and fairy tale. But isn't it rich and good ... even with its sorrows ... even with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? You cannot love without making yourself vulnerable to pain. You cannot live without suffering. And every life has its share of sorrow because it rains on the just and the unjust. But with that impartial providence comes a generous grace *beyond* our deserving that we can trust beyond our lives and *to which* we can entrust the people that we love. In all of life the tender mercies of God surround us. Life is a mystery. But we don't have to understand life to live it. We don't have to understand God to love God. We just have to throw ourselves on God's mercy and hope for the best. And it's a good hope, you know? It's a good hope. Amen.

May we pray?

O God, ruler of all creation,

Forgive us when we question your justice and righteousness. You show mercy to people we would never forgive. And we can see no one-to-one correspondence between goodness and reward or evil and punishment in this world. Teach us to trust you more and to accept that just as your providence reaches all humankind without regard to human behavior, so your grace is generous beyond all justice - even to us. Even to us. Amen.