

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2020: "That's not fair!!!"

That's not fair!!! Waaaahhhh!!!

Sound familiar? I doubt there's a single person who has under any circumstances watched over children who hasn't heard this scenario play out. One child feels slighted by another, and the accusation of the cardinal sin of unfairness comes out.

It happens between siblings, between friends on the playground, even between total strangers.

And, if we're honest, we never really outgrow it. The accusations of unfairness become more subtle and get hidden behind words that sound more adult as we grow up, but it's really the same battle we had as toddlers on the playground. The only difference is the fight is bigger and the stakes are higher.

We don't need to look any further than the culture wars raging in our nation right now to see this phenomenon in action. What we all share in common is a strong sense of justice and fairness. With perhaps a few extreme exceptions, that seems to be a universal human trait. However, we differ tremendously on what the details of justice and fairness look like.

In our society today, there are those who have been for generations used to a life of relative peace and prosperity, and right now they have a sense that this is threatened. That's not fair!!!

And on the other side, there are many who, not without reason, feel that they have not really had a fair shot at the American

dream for generations, and even now their attempts to rise are being thwarted. That's not fair!!!

And, much like toddlers on the playground, we all too often succumb to the assumption that when our sense of fairness is offended, that automatically puts us in the right and our opponents in the wrong.

Isn't this exactly what we heard play out in today's Gospel? The workers hired at dawn's complaint essentially boiled down to a cry of "that's not fair!!!" Why do these lazy bums who worked only an hour get paid the same amount we do?

Of course, there's another side to this story that's not explicitly mentioned in the passage. The ones who were standing around idle in the marketplace at 5 pm were not likely having a particularly good time. In fact, they were probably terrified. With the workday being nearly all gone, they were facing the prospect of going home to hungry families completely empty-handed. They probably looked at the ones who had been hired early in the day and who would go home with sustenance in hand and thought to themselves, "that's not fair!!!"

But if this parable is meant to be a window into the Kingdom of God, and all of Jesus' parables are, it tells us some important things.

To unpack these things, let's back all the way up to the Bible's account of some of the earliest moments of the human race. Remember that story about Adam, Eve, and the serpent? The humans were told to go ahead and eat anything they wanted from any of the trees in a delightful garden, with just one exception.

Remember which one that was? It was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But we did eat from that tree, and after that God saw that we had taken upon ourselves an unbearable curse. The knowledge of good and evil is apparently a burden that the human race was never meant to bear.

Now obviously this can be taken to the point of absurdity. We can't utterly stop judging anything as good or evil, and we're probably not supposed to. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, a strong sense of justice and fairness seems to be hard-wired in the human psyche.

But, today's Gospel, especially if we read it in light of humanity's original sin, cautions us to greatly limit the scope of our judgment of what is good and evil, of what is fair and unfair.

"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" God asks. "Or are you envious because I am generous?"

If we can take a step back from the drama of the story and trust God's sense of fairness and justice to be perfect, it is apparently to give to everyone what they need to live, regardless of what path led them to the point of needing it. The master in the parable gave every worker what was promised and what was needed, and to some he gave more.

This brings to mind another one of Jesus' parables. Do you remember the one about that crazy farmer who sows seed? There's no rhyme or reason to where the seed lands. It just gets scattered with wild abandon and unthinkable generosity.

This is apparently economics as God sees it. Just give, give, and give some more, foolishly scattering the gifts anywhere and everywhere a potential receiver is to be found. That way the deserving will get what they need and so will the undeserving.

But doesn't this mean that God is fundamentally unfair? Why should the lazy, the petty, and the mean get as much or even sometimes more than the hard-working, the thoughtful, and the kind?

And here's where I see God asking us a very hard question: "Who are you, human, to judge who is lazy and who is hard-working, who is petty and who is thoughtful, who is mean and who is kind? Your knowledge of good and evil is compromised at best."

It's a matter of priorities. I don't believe that God desires us to completely abandon our sense of fairness and justice, nor do I believe we even have that capacity. But I do believe that God desires us to keep first things first, and these parables offer us a pathway for doing just that.

Mercy first, then justice. Generosity first, then fairness. Over and over the Scriptures paint a picture of a God whose first impulses are always mercy and generosity, and judgment enters the picture only later, if ever. And we are encouraged to do likewise.

There's a narrative in our culture that suggests that if we let our guard down for even an instant we'll be taken advantage of by lazy and malicious actors, so we can't afford to make mercy and

generosity our consistent first impulses. But if we take our faith seriously, we cannot think in this way.

Over and over we are promised that regardless of outward appearances, regardless even of destruction and death, God is a shield and a hedge of protection around us. If we really trust that this is true, we can afford to let down our guard. When we sense justice being breached, we can afford to be merciful first and then ask the harder questions later. When we sense fairness being compromised, we can afford to be generous first and then wonder later what everyone is rightly due.

It comes down to a simple question. How deeply do we really trust in God? Is it deeply enough that we can let something other, something higher than ourselves be the judge, and we can dare to be merciful and generous? If our Maker dares to behave that way toward us, can we not at least do our best to follow?