

Sermon – God is Unfair!

In-order to understand the Gospel reading for today, it helps to have read the previous Chapter, let me summarize it.

One day a rich young ruler came enthusiastically running up to Jesus and asked: "What must I do to be saved?" Jesus answered: Keep the law. "This I have done from my youth up," came the reply. Yet one thing do you lack said Jesus. Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor. Then come follow me. We are told that the young man walked away sorrowfully, for he had great wealth. Concluded the Master: It will be hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

The disciples had been watching the dynamics of this happening and they were quite disturbed. Jewish tradition had always taught that God had especially blessed rich men and that is why he was rich. In their way of thinking, if a wealthy man could not receive salvation, then how could a poor man have any hope? They asked of Jesus: who then can be saved?

It reminds me of the movie Fiddler on the Roof. The poor Jewish milkman who lives in early 1900 Russia sings what he would do "if I were a rich man." His wife reminds him: money is a curse. He immediately shouts up to heaven: curse me God, curse me. Jesus has just turned away a wealthy man, and in the Jewish way of thinking it doesn't make any sense. In fact, I am not sure how many Anglican or Lutheran preachers would have the courage to do it. Most of us would be ecstatic to have a rich benefactor willing to fund our ministry or church.

But it was Simon Peter who drew the question even more clearly into focus for us. He asked what is on the mind of every one of us, only we are too sophisticated to ask it or too self-righteous to admit that we even think it. Peter didn't have any problem with that. He simply laid his cards out on the table. He said, "Lord, we have given up everything, riches and all, to follow you." What then shall we have?" In others words, what's in this for us Lord. How do we stand to profit? Where's the payoff?

In response to Peter's question, Jesus told a story. It was the harvest time of the year and the gospel goes on....

If we are honest with ourselves, we might admit that the parable of the vineyard workers (Matt. 20) offends our sense of fairness. If this happened

in the work place or on the sports field we would shout “unfair, or biased, or even prejudice”. Why should everyone get equal pay for unequal work? The difference is in non-family values and family values. As one person talked of his family, “Back in Ontario when the apples ripened, Mom would sit all seven of us down, Dad included, with pans and paring knives until the mountain of fruit was reduced to neat rows of filled canning jars. She never bothered keeping track of how many we did, though the younger ones undoubtedly proved more of a nuisance than a help: cut fingers, squabbles over who got which pan, apple core fights. But when the job was done, the reward for everyone was the same: the largest chocolate-dipped ice cream cone money could buy. A stickler might argue it wasn't quite fair since the older ones actually peeled apples. But I can't remember anyone complaining about it.”

A family operates under a different set of values or norms than a courtroom or those outside the family. “In fact”, the man went on; “when the store ran out of ice cream and my younger brother had to make do with a Popsicle, we felt sorry for him despite his lack of productivity (he'd eaten all the apples he'd peeled that day--both of them”). You see, God wants all his children to enjoy the complete fullness of eternal life. No true child of God wants it any other way. Jesus said; “I have come that you might have life and have it to it's full”

In the family of God, our Father may not seem to be good at fairness, but he excels in generosity.

In her wonderful collection of poetry called, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, Anne Sexton examines her life like someone in a canoe rowing against the stream of life, encountering hazards along the way, and finally docking at the island of God's home. The concluding poem in the book is called “The Rowing Endeth.” In it she sees herself called by God's great laughter to join him for a game of poker. When the cards are dealt, she is surprised and thrilled. She has a royal straight flush. She will trounce God and win for herself whatever prizes God has brought to the table. In great excitement she slaps down her cards, claiming her winnings. Nothing can beat this hand!

But God only laughs, a great, rolling, joyful exuberance that energizes everything around. In rich good humor, with no malice at all, God throws down his cards. Five aces! That's impossible! But there it is. And when

Anne loses to God, she knows that really she wins. For God is not stingy with his wealth or his earnings. There are never any losers when they sit at table with God. God's laughter is always without malice or one-upmanship.

This is the gospel according to Jesus' parable. In spite of our good fortunes or savvy playing skills or sheer hard work, we never really win at the game of life when we play it by our own rules. But if God is bending them in the direction of grace, something wonderful always happens. As St Paul said in the letter to the Philippians "live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel" When we do that something wonderful will happen to you. Amen