

IT'S JUST NOT FAIR!

May the words of my mouth and the mediation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh Lord our Creator and Redeemer.

“Whoever told you life was fair?” Is there anyone here who didn’t hear that from their parents or say it to their children?

We say that, we know that, yet we hold on to the belief that life SHOULD be fair.

When I was a mediator, and would ask a litigant at the beginning of a mediation what she or he wanted they would almost always say – “I just want what’s fair” Rarely was it something that would be considered “fair” in a legal sense. It was usually way balanced in their favor, but they thought it was fair.

I often would answer with “fair is a four letter word that starts with f.”

What’s fair to you isn’t fair to me.

I’ve never liked the story of the Prodigal Son.

It’s not fair.

One son stays home with the father and does all the right things and the other one goes and lives a wastrel life but the father celebrates his return. The obedient son got no special recognition.

The NT is full of parables that aren’t fair. The story of the workers in the vineyards in Matthew where workers who labored one hour at the end of the day are paid the same as the laborers who worked since dawn – 12 hours, is all about unmerited Grace, not earning God’s favor. For the workers who started at the end of the day have the same needs as though who started at 6 am. Can you imagine trying to sell that concept to the public? People should make the same amount of money no matter how long they work? Today’s gospel ... “Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” ... So I tell you – there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. Just like the Prodigal Son.

How many examples are there in the New Testament of Jesus spending more time with sinners and tax collectors than righteous people? The “righteous people at the time were the Pharisees – the rule followers.

I think Jesus was trying to get a message across. God isn’t fair. God is grace. God loves ALL equally.

Fairness is a human concept, not a Godly one.

We teach children that Santa Claus will reward them if they are good all year. With good behavior comes rewards. Sometimes children carry this idea into adulthood and think of God as Santa Claus. But God isn't Santa Claus coming to reward us for good behavior.

I've heard people say they don't believe in God because "God isn't fair." Why does God allow all the suffering in the world? Why do children die? Why are bad people materially rewarded? People think they want a Just God. Someone who will even the score when all is said and done. In our human yearning for fairness the Roman Catholic Church even came up with the idea of Purgatory. A place we can go to expiate our sins. Those who've sinned a lot stay longer. Since none of us are perfect, we all have to go for at least a little while. Of course those who die with the great stain of Mortal sin go straight to Hell. There's nothing in the bible about purgatory that I'm aware of. But it makes us feel better. Justice.

But God is mercy. God is Grace. That's what all of these parables that aren't fair teach us. We can never "earn" God's love. Some people believe God is testing them, or punishing them if bad things are happening to them. This idea is pretty ubiquitous in the Old Testament. But bad things happen to everybody, and good things happen to most of us also. I've had my share of good and bad. So has just about everybody I know. In this life it can seem like the least deserving people get the biggest rewards. And that's not fair. I do think that is often an illusion though.

I heard on the news that one of the actors who bribed a college admissions official with \$15,000 to get her daughter into the college of her choice just wanted to give her child "a fair shot"? Fair shot? Not in my book. Cheating isn't a fair shot. But to her it was. Because it involved her daughter. And she loves her daughter.

For most parents, any objective notion of fairness goes out the window when it comes to their own kids.

Parent's struggle to be fair to their children. I guess that's a lofty goal. Parents usually treat children equally in their wills, even if one child has clearly been more generous and caring toward the parent than another. Is that fair? Its equal. Seems to me that what would be fair would be to reward a child that treated their parent well if there was a big difference in the way siblings treated their parents. But most people are scandalized if a child is cut from a will.

I have a dear friend who is in her 90's. She has a son and a daughter. The daughter became a corporate executive, very successful, married and had children who now also have children. She is a dutiful daughter and sees her mother often. The son is an addict, mostly living on the streets, never able to hold down a job and hasn't seen his mother in years. When I asked

my friend how she was going to treat them in her will she said “of course equally!” It’s fair. Well – it’s equal.

I haven’t been blessed with the joy, nor the anxiety and stress that comes from raising children. So this idea that parents treat their children equally regardless of behavior has been hard for me to understand. To me, fairness is justice, and it isn’t fair and just to treat people the same if one merits punishment and one merits reward. In the Prodigal Son story, I identified more with the child who stayed at home and did the right thing than the one who returned after wasting all of his father’s money. And I resented it. In my family it always seemed that bad behavior was rewarded. It certainly got more attention. And I didn’t understand it. I was equating fairness with love. Not only are they not the same, they are not even compatible.

About 12 years ago, Randy and I got two dogs. Rescue dogs. I’ve always had only one dog at a time. But this last time, we decided to get a companion dog for the big dog we had gotten first, while we were at work all day. The first dog we got, we call him Winnie, is a saintly dog. He is sweet and kind and always obeys. Never does anything he isn’t supposed to do, and is generous with his little dog “brother” whom we call Edgar.

Edgar is a little monster. He steals all of Winnie’s toys even when he has plenty of his own to play with. He doesn’t like to play catch the ball like Winnie does, but he doesn’t want Winnie to play either, so he grabs it when he can and hides it. He doesn’t even like to let Winnie have his treats. I can’t buy two toys because Edgar will grab both. So I have to buy three because he can only handle two at a time. But Winnie will give Edgar all of his toys freely. He’s that kind of dog.

Edgar is a brat.

Winnie is a saint.

But guess what? I love them both the same. I think I’m beginning to understand. Its radical. Love isn’t about fairness. It isn’t about behavior. It isn’t a reward.

I think I finally get that God loves all of His children equally despite our behavior. And I learned it through my dogs.

I can’t earn God’s love. It’s given to me freely. But I can love God back. And loving God back motivates me to try and do the right thing. I’m far from perfect and so I’m grateful that God is merciful rather than fair.