

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time “On Divine Fairness”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, when was the last time you approached God with a question regarding fairness? When was the last time you wondered aloud to God why some people’s lives are, by your point of view, somehow better or worse than your own? The Gospel today has perhaps the most unpopular parables of the Lord. You have this land owner who hires several groups of day workers, at different times during the day, to work in his vineyard. The first group begins work at dawn and the second group begins work later that morning. The third group begins work at noon and the last group in the late afternoon. At the end of the day, the land owner pays them all the same. I think our sense of justice would side with the group of workers who were there all day. Why should those who only worked an hour be paid the same as those who were there all day?

I think a temptation would be to pass by uncomfortable parables such as the one today so we can focus more on parables that seem more comfortable. If we did this, we would be missing an important opportunity to grow spiritually. It is good to take the time to contemplate the wisdom Jesus is trying to give us here. I think all of us at times can wonder why some people seem to be more talented than we are, or why some people seem to be more intelligent, healthy or just plain lucky. We can find ourselves wondering why it seems to us sometimes that God spreads his grace around disproportionately. We can even start thinking to ourselves: if I were God I certainly would have created the universe a bit differently.

You know who really understands the dilemma that the parable today gives us? Children! I learned a long time ago that it is very important for me as an uncle to make sure my gifts to my nephews and nieces are equitable. The reason for this is because children have finely honed justice radars built into their systems. Parents know about this built in justice radar all too well. Whenever the justice radar in a child gets triggered, a child can be the first to say, or even scream, the words we hear in households all over Christendom, “It’s not fair!” How many of you have heard those words from a child, “It’s not fair.”

When we listen to Jesus’ parable today of those who only work an hour getting paid the same as those who worked all day, the inner child inside of us wants to cry out “It’s not fair”. Of course, in the presence of God, we are all like children, are we not? Jesus taught us to live in the Spirit life like children with God as our heavenly parent. The words of the prophet Isaiah are a helpful hermeneutic to understanding the Gospel reading. Isaiah says, “Thus says the Lord, my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.” God is like a parent dealing with children. Jesus even teaches us to call God “Abba”, a word that is best translated as “daddy” rather than “father”.

When we think of the word justice, we think of what is rightfully due us. We know, however, that parental justice operates on a different level the child justice. For example, if one of a parent’s children demonstrates a particular gift or talent for music, a parent might do something special for that child, like give them an instrument to play and music lessons to help them develop that talent. Is that parent showing favoritism to that child over the other children?

Not necessarily. Other children may have different talents, such as soccer. Although a soccer ball is less expensive than a piano, we wouldn't say a parent is being unfair by spending more money on one child than another in this instance. A parent's sense of justice is different than a child's sense of justice. God's sense of justice is different than ours.

The context behind Jesus' parable has to do with how the Church regards converts from other faiths than Judaism. We are dealing with the Gospel of Matthew, and Matthew's Gospel is directed to the Jewish Christian community of the first century that saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophesy. The Jews were in the story of salvation from the beginning, so how do we treat all the non-Jews, who were called Gentiles, who want to join the new Christian Church? Should they first become Jewish before becoming Christian? The answer Jesus gives to the Jewish Christian community is, God's gift of salvation is offered to everyone and God will give all his children the same gift of salvation regardless if the converts can trace their heritage back to Abraham or not. Gentile converts to Christianity were to be understood as equally loved by God as those who entered into the story of salvation at the beginning. Many in the Jewish Christian community stamped their feet, held their breath, and said "not fair". It took the efforts of St. Paul and St. Peter and the first council of Jerusalem to uphold the equal rights of Gentile converts to Christianity.

Of course, we can contemplate how our fairness radars work in our relationships at home or in society, the Good News is whether we find ourselves in the story of salvation early in the day or late in the day, God loves us all equally and wants us to receive the same gift of salvation offered to all. This will challenge our sense of justice at times. It is good however to consider that God's justice, which is a function of God's unconditional love for us, offers grace to each of us differently with respect to our needs, the way a parent offers grace to their children. St. Paul therefore gives us good advice in the second reading when he tells us, "Brothers and sisters, Christ will be magnified in our bodies, whether by life or by death if we conduct ourselves in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ."

My friends, when was the last time you approached God with a question regarding fairness? When was the last time you wondered aloud to God why some people's lives are, by your point of view, somehow better or worse than your own? God's answer regarding divine fairness can be seen behind me here on the wall. I think if we spent enough time contemplating the cross we might come to a different conclusion as to what is fair in God's eyes. Christians, we all have our gifts, we all have our struggles and we all have our crosses to carry. However, if we convert our hearts and follow Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life, what good news it is to know that his gift of salvation is available to all.