

When Life Seems Unfair Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45 9-18-05

Those of us who have had children have certainly been serenaded by little voices telling us that this or that in life is “not fair.” Usually some friend of one child or another is doing something that we consider stupid or dangerous or expensive or not age appropriate. So, we tell our offspring that he or she cannot take part in what they view as a great adventure. For our trouble and concern we are informed that we certainly do not know what it is we are talking about, that “everyone is doing it” and that our decision is “not fair.” These arguments become far more complex as our children grow older and the logic they use in trying to convince us that we are being unfair grows increasingly interesting. Usually, these conversations do not injure us much as parents and we wait for the next such go-round. As our children grow and learn, and as we do, it seems these episodes become farther and farther apart—a blessing for any parent. When we are younger, we seem to think that life is, somehow, fair. It takes us all a while to discover that life isn’t fair and that is all there is to it.

For many years I considered the parable we read from the Gospel of Matthew one of those I liked least. I would turn it over and over and examine it from all angles trying to find the fairness in it. Most often I would find myself on the side of those workers who had put in a full day’s labor and who received the same amount of pay as those who had worked only one hour. I understood their disappointment and their grumbling.

I grumbled plenty when I saw someone short circuit the route to ordination while I was attending seminary, serving as an interim at a church and tending to my family. I felt that, somehow, although our Congregational system allows it, it was not fair to skip over the seminary portion of a pastor’s education. As a result of my real life experience I would tell God that this parable was really not fair. I knew that my personal struggle with it was not terribly distressing to God and that there would come a day when I might be able to grasp more fully its true meaning. Of course, at that time long ago, I did know that a parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” but I was far from seeing it with the required heavenly eyes. Perhaps, it took time and age for me to finally discover the depth and the joy of the meaning Jesus had in mind.

The joy is, that, it does not matter when or where it is someone comes to recognize “the way and the truth and the life” to be **the way** for his or her life. It doesn’t count more if someone has always been a Christian, a true follower of Jesus or if a person became such a follower somewhat late in life, even at the eleventh hour. We are all cherished by God and treated as equals no matter how many years of service we have or have not devoted to God through Christ. Often, we discover, the last will be first. This takes quite a while to absorb and accept.

The Israelites beginning their long journey through the wilderness or desert, did not feel that they were “the chosen people” of God as they grumbled their way along. They felt as if they had been deceived by Moses and Aaron and wished they could return home to their old way of life. The labor was difficult back in Egypt but they had a sense of security, a sense of being at home. They were hungry and tired and frightened. They were refugees on a long journey, which appeared to have no end, and there seemed to be little prospect of being fed in the near future. They were mumbling as people of little faith.

God, upon hearing their despair and knowing how important it was that they continued to believe in the earthly leader they could see, sent quails and manna to sustain them. This satisfied them for a while but they would continue in their discontent as time went by. Life seemed to be terribly unfair and they were not at all hesitant to express their feelings.

Not many of us are hesitant to express feelings of unfairness when raindrops seem to keep falling on our heads. But those of us who have lived a bit and dealt with unfairness begin to realize that it is just another fact of life.

I think much of what we may consider unfair in life is brought home to those of us who gather weekly in the little prayer group that meets each Wednesday at the parsonage. We are small in

number—on a good evening there are six of us. We have times of prayer for our world, our nation, our community at large and our community of faith. There may be prayers of celebration, thanksgiving and joy. But we are most devoted to lifting those into the presence of God who are struggling terribly with life.

Once in a while people move from our prayer list because they have recovered from a serious illness. But, often people stay with us for long periods of time as they deal with the ups and downs of life and its seeming unfair twists and turns. While we pray together in this group, I am certain we say much more in our times of sustained silence. We believe in the power of prayer or we would not bother doing this for others. Those who ask to be prayed for believe in it also and tell us it is good to know that they have a support system beyond themselves. Thinking that we are going through a difficult time all alone and that no one has been that way before and that no one cares about us can be terribly disheartening.

It is often surprising and encouraging for me to observe those for whom we pray. In most cases they journey on with hope and undaunted spirits. Rarely, if ever, do we hear them say that life is being unfair to them. I am certain they have their moments of despair and times of wondering why they are the ones suffering. But, as they move along there is an acceptance of where they are in life and it seems their perspectives remain steady. Sometimes I am asked by one of them why it is I think they are living for such a long time. This is a difficult question to answer. I really do not know and I say that. But, I also tell someone, who is bearing up under illness or old age, that I suspect they are living on as examples for the rest of us, showing us the way in which we all are to accept what happens to us in life and still be gracious in the living of it. There are many among us that are wonderful examples of this type of person, you know. Just slow down every now and then and take a look around. These lessons move around us and among us.

If we consider the reading from Philippians for this morning, we see that Paul has come to accept the hardships he has had to bear in spreading the gospel. Often imprisoned, he turned the time to his advantage by preaching to the guards and converting some of them. He found a way to turn what some might consider as gross unfairness to his advantage. He knew that suffering, especially for the gospel, was just a part of life and that it made those that did so better souls for it. He would have preferred to die and go to be with Christ, but he remained for the sake of those he served and for the continuation of his mission.

We always have a choice in the way we respond to the events of life. We can grumble and mumble about all that seems to be unfair to us, as did Moses' fellow travelers, or we can adapt and turn the situation to our advantage as did Paul. Life is worth the living when we make the most of what we have. It is worth the living when we come to understand that God's ways and God's timing are not ours. When we begin to grasp this as we move through life, we understand that the fairness of the God, who loves and cherishes us, surpasses our human comprehension. Amen