

Not Fair
September 24, 2023

Many of you know that my spouse Becca and I have two daughters. Cora is 2 years old, and Anna is almost 2 months old.

Anna, because she is a baby, gets a bottle of milk every 2 or 3 hours during the day. This is what we've been doing more-or-less since she was born. But just in the past week or two, it has become a bit of a problem.

It's a problem because Cora, the 2-year-old, sees her little sister getting milk all the time, and Cora only gets milk at meals. So when we feed the baby some milk, Cora watches, and you can also see the gears turning. "My sister is getting milk now. I have to wait until lunch for milk. This is not fair." And what comes out is "I want some milk!"

So my wife and I try to explain that Annie only drinks milk. She doesn't eat any food. So she needs a lot more milk than Cora, because Cora can eat all kinds of yummy things for lunch.

Cora can't quite process that information, and what she lacks in logical reasoning, she makes up for in volume. "I want some milk!"

And so at this point, my wife and I settle for a lesson in manners and how you ask for things, rather than a lesson in equity and fairness. You pick your battles.

It is a conundrum. We know that the world is not fair. And yet we want to instill some sense, some understanding of fairness in our kids, in our students, in the society around us. There is something inside of us that strives for fairness, that yearns for it, and when we are wrongs, we respond emotionally.

Jesus' parable today might make us frustrated. We hear that some laborers work for 12 hours, from 6 am to 6 pm, and some laborers work for just an hour. At the end of the day, they all receive the same pay, which is enough money to sustain themselves and their families for another day.

Let's check in with our emotions. Imagine that you're one of the workers who's been out there for 12 hours. How do you feel? Angry, frustrated, cheated, disgusted. Unfairness hits us deep. To our grumbling, the landowner responds, "I am paying you the wage that we agreed on at 6 am, when you started working."

Fine, we might say. Then tomorrow, I'm working for someone else.

Now imagine you're one of those laborers who was hired at 5 pm. You had been standing around the market all day, waiting for an employer to call you. With every passing hour, it becomes less and less likely that you'll be asked to work. With every hour, it becomes clearer and clearer that you and your family are going hungry tonight. What are the emotions you are feeling? Anxiety, fear, shame – why is no one hiring me?

Now this vineyard owner enlists you, and you work for an hour until quitting time. You are called to come get your wage, and you walk up, hoping you get enough to buy just a morsel of food for your family. Instead, you receive a full day's pay! What do you feel? Joy, elation, relief, maybe even a little guilt that you received so much. But you're not going to complain, because this pay is the difference between eating and going hungry.

Jesus is telling this story to his disciples. His disciples have been talking about the sacrifices that they've made to follow Jesus. And they're right. They've left their jobs, their families, any sense of security to travel with this man and learn from him.

And Jesus recognizes their sacrifice. He says, "When the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on 12 thrones." You disciples will be the recipients of God's grace.

But don't get your feathers all ruffled when you realize that other people who have not followed me as long also receive God's grace. The tax collectors. The lepers. The gentiles. The slow-to-learn. The hard-hearted. Don't be jealous that they are also loved by God. "Are you envious because I am generous?"

God's grace is not fair. If we are wronged, we complain. If we are on the receiving of the grace, we take it in stride and keep on going.

Isn't that the case in our reading from the Old Testament? The Israelites have just been delivered from Egypt, crossed through the Red Sea on dry ground, and here they are in the wilderness...with all their livestock, I might add.

And what do they start saying to Moses and God? "How could you bring us out here to kill us in the desert? Remember life in Egypt? Sure, we were slaves, but at least we had meat to eat. Now look at us."

We're certainly not going to eat our livestock, because livestock equals wealth, and we don't want to be poor! So God sends quail at night and manna in the morning, which appears on the ground. The word "manna" simply means "What is it?" Manna. Whatchamacallit.

And when the Israelites receive these wonderful gifts of food, do they fall on their knees and thank God? Do they say to Moses, "Surely we don't deserve this meat and rich bread." No! They eat it and go about their day! Some of them even try to hoard the manna, but anything that they don't eat goes bad by the next day.

It's not fair that these Israelites receive these gifts of bread and meat from heaven. But since it's unfair in their favor, they don't mind.

What it boils down to is that grace is not a zero-sum game. If I have 10 apples, and I give 9 of them to this person over here, then I only have 1 to give to you.

On the other hand, if I love someone with my whole heart, that doesn't mean that I'm going to run out of love to share with you. The same goes for God's grace. God loving this poor sinner doesn't mean that there is less of God's grace for you. Or if God loves this wonderful saint, it doesn't mean God will love you any less.

We live out this truth in our liturgy. Every Saturday/Sunday, we say the Confession of Sin, admitting to our wrongdoings. Some of us may have had a good week; some of us may have done some things that we are still working on. We ask for God's forgiveness through Jesus, and we are forgiven – all of us.

(The caveat here is that forgiveness does not mean we are free from the consequences of our sins. Absolution means that we are restored to right relationship with God, but sometimes there is still work to be done.)

After the Confession, we say the Peace. This is a statement of communal forgiveness. In sharing the peace, we are saying, "We are in right relationship with one another." And then we move into Communion. And at the rail, the worst sinner might kneel/stand next to the most righteous saint. And God's grace is there for both.

So the next time you feel the sense of, "That's not fair," take a moment to think about the situation. Do you notice it because you are getting the short end of the stick? What is the person feeling who receives the benefit of the unfairness. And maybe consider all the ways that things have been unfair in your favor. And give thanks for God's grace.

Amen.

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