

25th Sunday Ordinary Time
September 24, 2017

“But it’s Not Fair!”

Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9; Philippians 1:20-24, 27; Matt. 20:1-16

“But that’s not fair,” may just be one of the first complete sentences that children learn. They seemingly are born with an innate sense of justice, even if their definition is often based upon what suits them at the moment.

In a now famous study, a capuchin monkey rewarded for a task with a piece of tasty cucumber was pleased, until she saw one of her peers rewarded for the same task with a tasty grape. The monkey throws the cucumber at her handler and rattles the cage in anger. It is amazing to see– the monkey is smart enough to see that the animal in the next cage is doing exactly the same thing, and being rewarded differently. Faced with a choice–grapes are better than cucumbers!

It is illustrative because many still struggle with today’s parable because it seems so unfair on the face of it. The parable of the vineyard is one of the parables that is unique to St. Matthew. It is not related in any of the other Gospels. As such, this makes it stand out. So too does the teaching, for at first glance, the lesson is not immediately apparent.

First, there is a difference between being fair and being equal. Parents are great at teaching this. If there is enough cake for two pieces and there are two children– have one child slice the cake while the other picks. If you slice them unevenly, you lose. Too bad. It is not equal, but it was fair.

But what exactly is justice, as understood by our faith. The Catechism defines justice this way: “*Justice* is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. Justice toward God is called the ‘virtue of religion.’”

Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good.”¹

It is a bit of a formal definition. The just person is often mentioned in the Bible and describes one who “is distinguished by habitual right thinking and the uprightness of his conduct toward his neighbor.”²

In a word, justice is giving God and neighbor what they each is owed. St. Thomas Aquinas defined justice as “a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due with constant and perpetual will.” The idea is even older than the 13th century. There is a Latin motto attributed to Cicero, from the 1st century before Christ: “Justice renders to each one his due.”³

The first duty in justice is toward God. We have the duty to pray, to worship, to obey the God who has shown such great love to each one of us and whom we must love above all things. Our decisions in life must be evaluated on this basis.

The second duty in justice is toward our neighbor. A person must not only refrain from doing evil toward his neighbor, but also do what is good toward his neighbor. As such, a person must respect the rights of each person and establish relationships which promote equity among all people and build-up the common good.

Our Gospel reminds us that some come to the realization of their God-given vocation to holiness much later in life- some even appear

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 1807

² Ibid.

³ Cicero in *De Natura Deorum* 3:38, (“*iustitia suum cuique distribuit*”), justice renders to each one his due

to sneak in the back way at the last moment. This appears to be manifestly unfair, and it certainly would not pass muster with the National Labor Relations Board! But, rather than cry “foul,” we are invited to be grateful that the Lord invited them to partake of the banquet, because the important point is that they came.

The generosity of the Lord turns on its heels our pre-conceived categories of first and last. None of us deserves heaven—it is pure gift. For now, the Lord invites us to live with all the fullness possible, experiencing both its many joys as well as its sorrows.

Surely, there comes a time when we long much less for earthly joys, and this ought not to be construed as ingratitude to God. Our longing for heaven ought to grow as we grow older.

Still, our time has not yet come. Let us leave it up to God, and trust that He will bring us home in due season, perhaps in the blink of an eye or perhaps much longer. Our work is still here. God is not done with us just yet.