

Homily – Proper 20A
September 20th, 2020
S. Stephen's, Providence

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“It’s not fair. It’s just not fair.”

How many times have we exclaimed that in our lives?

I know I said it often as a child,

frustrated when I didn’t get what I wanted,

or failed to get my way.

When I worked at the cathedral in Washington,

it was a complaint I would hear from a boy chorister on occasion,

“That’s not fair, Mr. Straley.”

The truth, as many of us know,

is that life is not always fair.

In the world, people are treated unjustly and unfairly,

and the church calls us to stand in solidarity with them,

and to work for justice and fairness.

This calling is not unique to the Church either:

I am mindful this morning of the example of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who has left behind a legacy of a lifetime spent advocating for others so that our country and society are a little more fair for all, especially women.

When things aren't fair, we lament that, and we work to change it.

"It's not fair!" is essentially the cry from the laborers in our Gospel reading today.

We heard a parable in which a landowner hires workers for the day, and promises them each a denarius for their day's labor.

As the day progresses,

the landowner continues to return to the marketplace,

and when he sees people standing around idly,

offers them work in the vineyard too.

Even when the day is nearly over,

he finds and sends out yet more workers into the vineyard.

So when the day is finished and the laborers line up to receive their pay,

imagine the astonishment and outrage

when those who worked for only an hour receive a denarius,
the same amount which is paid to those who started in the morning,
and labored all day under the sun.

Any of us would rightly join with them in protesting,
saying "It's not fair!"

And perhaps it isn't.

In the money-in-exchange for labor market economy we live in,
that would be outrageously unfair.

We know what the world is like.

But Jesus is trying to tell us what the kingdom of God is like.

The way that the landowner is treating the laborers in this parable
is in fact not "fair" by our definition of the word – not fair at all,
and thank God for that.

That is some seriously good news,

if we can start to see this all through God's eyes, and not our own.

In the parable,

the landowner responds to their complaint not by saying,

“Well, life isn’t fair.”

Rather he responds with a question:

in our translation, it reads

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

In a newer translation, the question becomes “Are you envious because I am generous?”

This question is the translation of a Greek idiom which literally translates as “Is your eye evil because I am good?”

In other words, since the landowner has done them no wrong, and merely paid them exactly as he promised them, any anger or frustration on the laborers’ part stems from their own selfishness, not his generosity.

And generosity is really what this parable is all about:

not the laborers, not the vineyard –

but the absurd generosity of the landowner,

who I think we can safely assume represents God here.

In this parable about what the kingdom of heaven is like,
Jesus gives us a beautiful picture of God's love for us.
God doesn't wait for us to come to him,
but comes out to the market place – comes to us and finds us,
and says "Hey you! Come. See what I have for you."
And because God is not content to have just a few of us,
he keeps going out and calling more to the table,
calling more to go out and work in the vineyard.
Some of us will have been toiling and laboring for a longer amount of time,
and we will see new people coming in,
and perhaps like the laborers in the parable,
it is tempting to think we've earned a bigger portion of God's favor;
but unlike the market economy,
the economy of God's kingdom doesn't work like that.
When it comes to the invitation that God extends,
and his love, mercy, and faithfulness,
there's just abundant generosity – there's just more and more.

It's not like a piece of pie, where if you get a bigger piece,
it means that I get less.

When it comes to the love of God, there is an endless supply –
more for you, more for me, more for others – the whole world, in fact.

In this parable,

God shows us that he will always give us what we need:
and that what he has promised to give us is all we can ever want or need.

We don't need to be worried about what someone else is receiving,
because as the landowner points out in the parable,
it's his to do with as he pleases.

In other words,

God gets to worry about the things that belong to God – not us.

We don't get to decide who is worthy or deserving of God's invitation,
God's love, or God's grace.

And that is also very good news –

because there is nothing that you or I or anyone else under the sun
can do to truly earn or deserve it either.

It is freely given – unmerited and undeserved.

Grace that abounds. Love without measure.

All of it given absurdly and lavishly by a generous God.

All that he asks of us is to love him and walk in his ways –

to come to the streams of living waters, accept the gift of life in Christ,

and follow the example of his Son as best as we can.

Jesus saw the brokenness of the world – he encountered systems

and people that were unjust and unfair.

He responded with healing, and love, and compassion.

When we encounter cries of “That’s not fair” in this world,

we are compelled to advocate for those who are downtrodden,

and try to create a world that is a little fairer for all,

and resembles more and more the kingdom of God.

Paradoxically, as we’ve seen this morning,

in the kingdom of God,

things aren’t exactly fair either.

And that’s Good News if I’ve ever heard some. Thanks be to God. Amen.