

Grace defies logic

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 21, 2008.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first and the first will be last. Matthew 20:15-16

A basic rule we learned as children was about being fair. Be fair to people and hope they will treat you fairly. Somehow that rule left us with expecting life to be fair and we had to learn the bitter lesson that life isn't fair. It never was supposed to be. We can't expect everything in life to operate according to our rules of fairness and justice.

The belief in ultimate divine justice is found in the story of Jonah. He warns the people of Nineveh that if they don't turn from their evil ways, they will bring calamity upon themselves. Even though the people repent and change their ways, Jonah is resentful that God's wrath is not brought down on them. As petty as it seems, Jonah's selfish response to God's generosity is based on the very real and very human expectation of justice.

Jesus illustrates the tendency to resent God's generosity in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. The owner pays the same wages to those who work for only one hour as he pays those who work all day. After he hires the initial crew to work in the vineyard, the owner goes out several times during the day to hire additional workers. He hires some at nine in the morning, others at noon, and again at three in the afternoon. The last of them are hired at five o'clock and even though they work only that final hour they are paid the same wages as those who worked all day. At the end of the day, all of the workers receive a full day's pay, whether they worked all day or only for the last hour. Those who put in a full day's work grumble over what they perceive are unfair employment and labor practices, even though they are reminded that they were paid according to the agreed amount and should not resent what others are paid.

We can appreciate the sense of injustice under the present day rule of equal pay for equal work. Today, the local union would file suit on behalf of those who were hired first on the grounds that they deserve more pay than those who were hired at the end of the day.

This story is less about labor relations and more about the impossibility of earning God's favor. We must never begrudge God's generosity. The principle of equality doesn't apply in God's realm because God's love for us does not depend upon our standard of fairness. God's grace defies human logic. What we receive is always more than what we deserve. It's not that God isn't concerned about fairness and justice, but our own limited standards of fairness and justice just don't apply to God.

Jesus' love extended to the unlovable and the unacceptable people of his time. That is why his detractors were astonished that tax collectors and prostitutes would be welcomed in the kingdom ahead of them. What they had to learn is that redemption is available to everyone, particularly those on the margins of society who are sincere. We cannot judge their worthiness.

It does seem unfair when bad things happen to good people and even more so when good things happen to bad people. When it comes to human suffering, we may feel we have a case against God. We may wonder how a loving and merciful and all-powerful God doesn't save good people from suffering. I resist easy answers. I don't believe that there has to be a reason for everything. Sometimes there isn't any reason why people suffer. Disease and natural disasters don't always have a cause and effect and it is in the midst of what we don't understand that we

find God is very much with us. It is at times of loss of a loved one that I don't feel abandoned, but am certain that God shares in the loss and grief.

Jesus warns the disciples who have been faithful in following him that they should not expect any favors. Jesus reaches out to the unlikely people in greater need. God's sense of justice and fairness doesn't follow the simplistic reasoning that those who try to lead good lives are rewarded. The plain and simple fact is that we are saved not by anything we do but only by God's grace. There exists no system governing God's love because grace is not subject to our standards merit. God's grace is given freely and is neither deserved nor earned. There is no timekeeper's clock or accounting ledger. Those who are first in our system of thinking are last in the mind of God. The paradox is that any reward or recognition we seek for ourselves ends in failure. Our human worldly standards of reward and punishment are lost on God. Jesus had a way of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. This is not to say that we should not continue to try to do the right and loving thing. We just don't look for any personal reward.

Human misery and suffering are always with us, no matter what the circumstances. While we hope and pray for our own well being, God is more interested in who we are and what we can become than in rewarding us for what we think we deserve.

We are given far more than we could ever hope to have. Whatever we receive from God is not compensation, it is a gift. God is never obligated to us, though we are always indebted to God. Grace is a debt that can never be repaid, no matter what we do. The challenge for us is to learn how to love others more than we think we can and more than what we think they deserve.

To put it in the perspective of God's measure of values, those who are last will be first and those who think themselves important will be wait-listed. We simply cannot make any assumptions about ourselves or anyone else.

The profound truth is that God loves each of us no more and no less than anyone else. That is the first rule of humility. If we have no illusions about ourselves it is certain that we will not be disillusioned. That is all we need to know.