

God is Not Fair

Sermon by Reverend Richard L. Tafel

Text

The gospel lessons this morning, which was very long, it's also a story we're very familiar with. Whether you've read the scripture or not you've heard the phrase 'The Prodigal Son' right? It's a very familiar story. In fact it's so familiar that it's a little hard to hear it and think there's anything new that we can learn from the story 'The Prodigal Son.'

Now when you hear the story, I'm just curious, who do you relate more to? Do you relate more, in your own life, to the dutiful son who does the work, shows up and takes care of his dad? Or do you relate more to the Prodigal or lost son who goes out, has a Crazy Life, loses all of his money, parties, drinks, hires prostitutes and has to sort of come back in shame and embarrassment and ask for help? Should I ask for a show of hands or do you just want to think about it?

I know in my case I think I definitely go back and forth I think in my life but I would relate more probably to the dutiful son as well and that's really what the story is about in a nutshell. It's pretty straightforward. Jesus is basically saying to religious leaders who were criticizing him for being with these outcasts that this is what fairness is in the Kingdom of Heaven. I think we can conclude from this text that God is not fair here right? Fairness is a very important principle. We grow up with it; we learn it at a young age. If you are around a seven year old, you know a seven year old is adamant about being fair. I am one of six kids and if my mother so much as poured a little bit more orange juice in my glass and a little less in my brother's glass: "It's not fair, he got more than me!" You said that too?

Our politics is full of the language of fairness. We hear candidates say "the rich should pay their fair share," right? We have other people saying "it's not fair for those immigrants to come here and not get in line. Do it this way! Be fair!" Fairness plays out very much like in the story people say "why should I pay for people who don't work right? That's not fair; I'm working hard they're not so we give them support."

It's something we have in our daily life, It's something we kind of live by and I confess, as a minister that if I was to leave here today and I went to Whole Foods and I got in line and I'm waiting and I'm waiting and someone cuts in front of me, I will go from spiritual beacon of light to outrage fairness warrior. That's not right!

Airports like super markets bring out my fairness warrior. I've traveled on enough airplanes now where I've noticed the people that do the pretend line cutting. You know they kind of walk up like they don't know what's going on and they slowly work their way up into the line. They know exactly what they're doing and it's not fair. And I'm not usually the one who says "excuse me the lines back there," but I'm glad when someone does.

I want fairness. I want rules. And it feels to me like in this text Jesus is saying that God doesn't care about the rules. God is not fair and that's confusing. So I need to look a little deeper to see what I can learn from each of these characters to help me understand fairness.

Let's first look at the dutiful son.

What can we learn about that? Well clearly the lesson for the dutiful son is that if you're following the rules, if you're doing it because it's fair but your motivation is not love then it's no good. In your program today there is actually a quote from Emmanuel Swedenborg where he basically says there are people who live their whole life attending worship on Sunday, they give to the poor, they do all these great things, they're public figures. But they do it out of a sense of selfishness and they want to get credit publicly. A spirit of love does not motivate their lives. And he concludes by saying they are frauds. That's pretty powerful and that's sort of where Jesus is going with the story of the dutiful son.

Now what can we learn about the other son? The Prodigal Son? Well this is a more spiritual message I think. The message is basically that: No, God is not fair, God's love is consistent, constant and it's undeserved by us and it's for everybody, all the time and God is love and His love is constant. Maybe the best analogy that we read in reading group a few weeks ago here, was that God is like the sun. We don't earn the heat, we don't earn the light, but we can block it and that's sin-stopping the light. But we don't make the light happen. It comes on everybody and so is the love of God coming up on everybody. The love of God can't be earned and none of us deserve it but it is constant and consistent. What can we learn from the other son that we're most like? I think that if we have a dutiful personality we can learn from the Prodigal Son about taking risks and maybe living life up a little bit. I think we can get stuck in patterns and we can follow the rules and we can keep our heads down and we can miss kind of the joy of life.

This Saturday I was up at 'the Meridian Center' where he had a group of Middle East-women entrepreneurs and they were all sharing their business plans; what they were trying to do to change the world and to grow their business. And everybody there

was judging the business and trying to help them figure out how to create their business. It was a really great day but in that room they all shared the attributes of entrepreneurs- risk-taking, up and down bank accounts, putting your family at risk at times. It is very frightening but without risk takers there are no innovation, there is no change.

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If everybody is strictly following the rules it's really hard for there to be innovation. So I think for those of us who are more on the dutiful side we can learn about risk, taking chances and maybe enjoying life. So what could we learn if we're on the more Prodigal side? The prodigal side is pretty straightforward. If your life is basically always looking for other people to help you out in a crisis or you're always looking to have everything resolved by somebody else and kind of doing your own thing and being selfish; that's not a way forward. You need to also live in service to others and reach out to others. I think we can learn from both.

If I had to conclude I think in a way, the message is that we're actually all the lost son; that we all need forgiveness, that we all have shame. That shame is the shame of not wanting to go back to his father and it often keeps us from healing because we're so embarrassed by it. But as I've said before anytime there is shame, it is really never of God. Even though many religions use shame, it is never of God. So shame can keep us from healing, shame can keep us from asking for forgiveness, shame can keep us from going home but that is not the way forward and the way to God is a way of: we all need the love of God and we're lucky that God is not fair. There's a third character in the story and that's the father.

This week I was getting my hair trimmed over here in Dupont Circle at that very classic Barber Shop and I had Mario as my hair cutter from Nicaragua; he grew up in Nicaragua. And he was talking to me and he said "looks to me like you're writing a speech," and I thought to myself "do I tell him what I'm really doing," because it never goes well when you tell people you're a minister. I usually get in a fight. People usually have to harangue. So I said no I'm writing a sermon. He said "wow what text?" And I thought "wow only somebody raised not in the United States would ask that question." And I said "The Prodigal Son" and he said "I love that story. It's a beautiful story. When you preach to your people do me one favor: preach what nobody ever talks about." "What's that?" I've got all the answers here, I'm writing my sermon. He said "remind them that the father is the same; the father is the same. There is only one father and he loves them both. It's the same father." We sometimes think we're either the bad son or the good son; the bad daughter or the good daughter. We have one God who loves all of us and we're united in that. And the goal I think in our lives is to move beyond the resentment towards those who are getting things that they don't deserve and the "I'll deal with that tomorrow" attitude of the two sons and their extremes and we want to become more like the father who is the God-figure in the story and the father lives in abundance: There's plenty for everybody; this is all going to work out; there is no shortage of love here. That's the way we'll grow. How do we know we've reached that point when we're in a conversation with someone and they tell us very good news in their life and you think to yourself "why are they getting that and I'm not getting that?" Secretly; we don't say it but we think it. "How did that happen to them and not happen to me?" That's scarcity. That is not of God. But when we can truly be joyful for another person's success and truly be sad at another person's loss and truly be empathetic with other people we're more like that father who can respond to both and he doesn't complain to the dutiful son at the end he says "let me explain it to you." He is empathetic to both.

We can measure that in our own lives that when we're serving others we do it in joy. When we're helping others it's really about them, it's getting beyond ourselves. So in our lives let us take more risks if we've been playing it safe. Let us be more responsible if we've been irresponsible and let's realize that we're all lost, none of us are any better than anyone else and God is not fair because fairness is contingent on something and God's love is not contingent on anything; It is constant, it is never withheld, we cannot earn it, we cannot work for it, it's a gift that we can accept or reject. So let us each try to grow and develop ourselves in ways that we haven't. And luckily for us God is not fair. God is love and that love is abundant. Amen.