

Proper 22 C
St. Luke 17:5-10
October 2, 2016
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

It's Not Fair!

"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table?'"

Slave owners are not my cup of tea, in fact, I don't even drink tea, and especially not that brand of tea. Here they have taken advantage of the hard labor of these human souls all day for no pay, and then have the nerve at the end of the day not to thank them, but to expect them to serve them and wait on them at table, before they have a chance to rest and seek nourishment after their labors! This just doesn't seem fair or just in my book. In fact, slavery is a horrible, sinful institution which is neither fair nor just.

It is interesting that God could be contrasted with the slave owner, because God does just this: after our long life of labors, God invites us to sit down at table *with God*, and God serves us. We are no longer servants, but God's friends. As St. John 15:15 says: *"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you."*

In the Kingdom of God, our souls participate in what we might call an *egalitarian* community, even though we are completely unequal with God. God calls us God's friends and invites us to

sit at table with him. This is God's justice. We are not servants or slaves, but God's children, heirs of God's kingdom. And there is room for all God's children at that table.

This story screams unfairness. How dare this slave owner expect these poor souls to serve him after their day of labor, while he enjoys the lap of luxury! What gives him the right to live this way and command others and rule their lives this way?

Life is not fair. Sometimes you just cannot catch a break. It never rains, it pours. Bad things come in threes. These are the clichés we give voice to when life doesn't go our way and bad things happen to us, without any cause or reason on our part.

The stock market crashes, and we lose our retirement savings. Nothing we did wrong to deserve this! We tried to be good savers and did what wise advisors told us to do. Now our hard earned money is gone, while some wealthy banker is being paid a humongous bonus for his bad stewardship of our funds. It's not fair!

You have worked faithfully for the same company for many years. You enjoy your job, and you have given it your all. Then one day, you get called into the boss's office, and are informed that your services are no longer needed and you are to collect your personal effects and leave in 30 minutes, accompanied by security like you're some sort of thief, totally shamed in front of your peers and co-workers as if losing your job wasn't enough. And the mid-level manager who gave you the news will receive an increase in salary for his or her hard work in trimming the staff and giving people the bad news. It's just not fair!!

You have been married for 15 years, raised children together, and then one day, you discover that this man who promised to love you forever, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, and to forsake all others, until you are parted by death, has been shopping around and has purchased a new car, as it were, and that you are being replaced for the newer model, thank you. And due to his manipulations, to add insult to injury, he has managed to grab most of the marital assets and leave you to care for the children on a pittance of an income called child support, which he may or may not pay on time. It's simply not fair, is it?

Or there's the person who has exercised daily and eaten right all their lives, who seems to be the picture of health, who visits the doctor for their annual physical only to discover they have some horrible disease which will likely change their lives forever. And they go home and see their neighbor lounging in the back yard, a man who drinks, who overeats, who never exercises, and who smokes, just sitting there with no problems whatsoever. It is just not fair!!

Life is surely not fair, and the slaves in today's Gospel story would gladly tell you that.

This reminds me, and should remind you of another similar story to today's Gospel, which appears in Matthew 20:10-16:

"Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them,

'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I gave to you. 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."

Equal pay, equal love is God's promise and gift to all of us. We should not expect more. We need to know we are not entitled to more. We do not need more than the gifts, grace and hope which God has already given to us. But to some, it feels unfair. I did more good deeds, I worked harder at being a good Christian, I never committed a sin that hurt anyone but me, so it's just not fair! I should get a better reward!

Should we be surprised if we should suffer some perceived deprivation? Should we feel exempt from suffering in this life because we are Christians? The model we have for a Christian success is Jesus himself, and we know that *he suffered* for us. What can our sufferings, slights, perceived injustices be, when measured against what He endured? We may come to suffer and experience the injustices of living life, but now we are not alone anymore in that suffering: *"Though I walk in the Valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are here with me Lord, your rod and staff are a comfort to me."*

As St. Paul said in today's Epistle:

"God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self discipline... join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a Holy Calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace." [2nd Letter of

Paul to Timothy 1:1-14]

Join with me in suffering for the Gospel. That is our lot. That is our calling and our duty. It doesn't say, join with me and I promise you a pink Cadillac and a house in the Hamptons. Yet some believe that God is like Santa Claus, and if you are good and do what God's asks, you will be rewarded with many good things in this life, and will be exempt from the bad things that might come your way. But it doesn't work that way, *and it's not fair!*

I had an interesting phone call from an attorney late in the day at work this past week, which for me, spoke volumes about today's passage. It was more than 40 minutes past the closing time of her office when I spoke with her. I expected to get her voicemail and speak with her on Monday morning. Instead she answered. Shocked by speaking in person to her, I said, 'you're working late.' She said, 'I often stay late- working until 6 or 6:30 PM for my clients. It is my job. I won't leave until I have taken care of what I need to for them.' When I suggested others should be aware of how hard she was working, she said, 'most of us work late every night, it's nothing special, and no matter what we do, people still think we are not working hard enough. But that's not what drives me.'

"I am only doing my duty, I am only doing my job." The reward for hard work and sacrifice is from work accomplished, goals met, from people who are helped. It is about the journey and not the so-called rewards. It feels good. When we have done a good day's work, we can sleep well at night.

What is fair? What is just? God challenges are individualistic interpretations of those concepts. Life is not fair, and we learn that pretty quickly, but that does not mean that life is not good, is not a blessing to each one of us. The problem is that nothing entitles you to anything in life: all is grace, a

blessing, and a total gift from God. How you use those gifts is up to you. But what is first and foremost, is to recognize how truly blessed you are and to give thanks for those blessings. Even things which seem bad at first, may be blessings in disguise. The marriage that ended which seemed unfair, may have relieved you from tremendous internal struggle and burdens to be free to live with some one who truly cares for you and loves you. The job lost may have prevented a heart attack or worse, somewhere down the road, from all the stress and drama that it took out of you to work there. The limits of an illness may open your eyes to appreciate the blessing and miracle that each day is, and helped you live those days more fruitfully with much more grace. And the lost retirement money may challenge you to prepare for a happier, more stress-free retirement, not relying merely on some savings to do that for you. What seems good at first, may end up being bad for you, and what started out bad may become the cornerstone of a new life for you.

What is fair? Leave that up to God. Trust God is doing greater things than you can desire or pray for. God has been more than fair with you if you open your eyes. Give thanks for your blessings each morning and night before you go to bed. Trust that God has your best interests at heart, and you will find that life with God is very good. AMEN