

The Insanity of It All!

I'm going to start off by telling you that preparing a sermon for today was *very difficult*. There's just so much to talk about! There's so many things to consider; so many sermon possibilities. Just consider all the sermon topics in the Old Testament lesson. The Israelites, in spite of all of God's very *recent* and unmistakable miraculous displays of power and might and mercy and grace, which they've all *personally* borne witness to and experienced over the past several weeks, still grumble and quarrel with each other, with Moses, and even with God. "*You only brought us out here to die! We had it better in Egypt! You don't care if we die, do you?!*" Wow... that sounds just like us today, doesn't it?

Oh... but it gets worse. These fools even had the *audacity* to question God's presence among them. "*Is the Lord really among us or not?*" Do you know how often that question has been asked or implied just in these past several months? I've had face-to-face conversations with self-proclaimed "good Christians," who've flat-out questioned God's real presence in the midst of COVID, especially when it comes to in-person worship. "Divine service" apparently takes on a different meaning when the threat of germs is in the air (or in the narthex or in the pew or in Holy Communion). In fact, the questioning is really a terrible blend of "*Is the Lord really here?*" mixed with "*Did God really say?*" Oh yeah... and a strong dose of "*You don't care if we die, do you?!*" Like Solomon said, there's nothing new under the sun. To that we could add, "*Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*"

You listen to St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, and it's clear that this was what he was thinking. He points the foolish Corinthians to the foolish Old Testament Israelites and tells them that they are behaving the **exact same way**. He tells them they are behaving in an "*insane*" manner; that is, they are doing the exact same things, and yet expecting different results. "*Stop! Look at OT Israel! God was not pleased with them, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. It didn't end well for them! These things took place as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.*" Well... have we learned from all these examples (and we have even more examples than those Corinthians did)? Have we learned, or are we still behaving like insane fools, doing the same sinful, stupid things, and yet expecting different results, as if God will now be pleased because it's different? We're doing it, so it has to be different, right? Nothing new under the sun.

Now consider the Gospel lesson. Talk about having enough material for a month of Sundays! Keep in mind that Jesus is teaching this parable to His own apostles, who firmly believed that they deserved greater heavenly treasures and better treatment from God because *they gave up everything to follow Him, and they had been with Him from the very beginning*. Jesus had just got done saying

(ch 19) that the littlest children— newborn babes and nursing infants who've contributed nothing to the cause—will inherit the kingdom of heaven while it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into heaven. The disciples were troubled by all this. Peter pipes up: *“What about us? We've left everything to follow you. What are we going to receive? Don't we deserve better than the newborn babes and Johnny-come-latelies?”* Jesus responds with this parable. **Talk about troubling.** Everybody gets the same participation trophy? Everybody gets the same wage, even though some worked all day, from the beginning, and some barely did any work? I realize that's a very popular platform in today's culture, but if you've ever had to *earn* a paycheck, you know how wrong/offensive that concept is. For you younger kids, change “wage” to “grade.” Everyone gets the same grade, even though some work hard and some don't. ***That's not right, is it? That's not fair!***

But is that really the lesson we should glean from this text: Like all the rest of life, God isn't fair either? Well... hold on. Let's think on this. Jesus Himself says that the Master in the parable very plainly and unapologetically tells the disgruntled workers that He ***most certainly was fair*** in His dealing with them. (That doesn't mean He's a socialist. Don't go reading into this text what you want it to say; what isn't there.) The Master was fair in His dealings—plain and simple. He gave them ***exactly*** what He told them upfront He would give them. He didn't cheat them. He didn't change the rules or move the goal posts halfway through. They all knew what they were getting into before they even began. The Master was fair ***to everyone involved***. More than that, He's free to do what He wants with His money, and He agreed from the onset to give **everyone** a denarius. It didn't matter if they worked all day or for just a few minutes. They all got a denarius. He was fair. He kept His Word, from start to finish. ***B-b-but...it's not fair!***

Okay... so let's talk about fairness then. St. Paul tells us in Romans 3 that *“all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the wages for that sin is death.”* All means everyone, right? No caveats or asterisks or “special conditions apply.” Nope. All means that everyone across the board; every man, woman, and child—even the littlest lives still dwelling in the womb. That means that **EVERYONE** is a sinner and therefore **everyone** justly and fairly deserves temporal and eternal punishment for that sin ***in the eyes of God***. Remember: Sin isn't just what you do; it's who you are, by nature. As children of Adam, we are all sinners. We're all dead in our sin, from the oldest to youngest, greatest to least.

But this is where the “unfair fairness” of God bursts through into the wonderful Gospel reality that ***He freely gives His grace and forgiveness to everyone***, even and especially to those who don't deserve it (which is everyone). I know it really bothers some folks to say that God is unfair. I don't know why. ***Isn't unfairness what mercy and grace are really all about?*** If you remember, mercy is defined as not receiving what you do deserve, and grace is understood as

receiving something you absolutely do not deserve. When you think about it, **there's nothing fair at all about mercy or grace!**

You want to talk about truly unfair? Look to the cross of Christ! Jesus Christ, the innocent and perfect Son of God; the blameless, the sinless Son of God, died for the sins of the *entire world; not just for the “good” or the elect.* Remember: God so loved the **whole world**—*not just the elect or the “good” or those who “deserve” it*—that He sent His only-begotten Son to die for it. That means that Christ died for **EVERYONE**. Christ died for you... instead of you. ***That's not fair! That's unjust! That's criminal!*** And yet... that's **exactly** what God does for us with His only-begotten Son. The innocent One—singular—dies in place of the guilty... all of us. The undeserving One unfairly suffered our justly-deserved wrath and punishment. His life-giving, life-saving blood and water poured forth from His pierced side for **everyone**. Our heavenly Father gave to Jesus all that we deserved, and He gave to us all that we don't deserve. That's the very epitome of Divine mercy and grace. That's God's mercy, grace, and love ***for you***. When you really think about it (especially when you consider it all through the lens of the cross), ***God's really not fair at all, and thank God that He's not!*** Rejoice and thank God that He is ***lovingly and mercifully unfair*** to us in Christ, through Christ, and because of Christ.

I'll end all this by simply pointing to the Lord in your very midst (which isn't even a question), and I'll urge you, just like St. Paul did, to run the race set before you. Bear in mind: The race of faith is a race that is run in repentant humility. It's a race to the bottom; a race to be the least/lowest. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven are those who truly know and understand the utter depravity of their sinfulness and the incomprehensible mercy and grace of their Lord and Savior. They understand the great unfairness of it all, and they can't help but respond to such mercy/grace in humble service and obedience. The last/least will be first, while the first will be last. I know that the race is taking us through some pretty dark and scary wilderness right now. It's certainly not an ***unprecedented*** race in terms of humanity/history, but we do currently find ourselves in some scary and uncharted territory to be sure. What does your Lord say to all this? **Run the race set before you.** Run the race in the assurance and the humility of baptismal faith, for you belong to Him, and nothing can take that away from you. Be in Church. Be with the Lord, right where He calls you to be; right where He promises to be...unconditionally. Hold fast to Christ, even as you run your race and make your way through this dark and ***hostile wilderness***, for here is your Immanuel Lord, in your midst, ***His life-giving Water and Blood still flowing forth from His victorious side*** to you as He graciously and abundantly pours out His love for you in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Run the race set before you. Run in faith until God Himself mercifully says your race is finished and He graciously brings you across the finish line and home to heaven, where He Himself will give you the trophy and crown of everlasting life that has already been won for you by Christ Himself. In His name and to His glory... **AMEN**