

3rd Sunday after Pentecost – June 26, 2022

The Rev. John A. Mennell

“God is not Fair”

I was listening to this delightful podcast last week on one of my drives to church. It was from the NPR series “This American Life” which I am sure some of you are familiar with. It was a re-run of something that had been produced a few years ago. It was a story about a nursery school classroom and the frustrated teacher.

The teacher felt like half of her time was devoted to mediating minor disputes between the members of her class. Anytime any injustice or perceived unfairness happened, the aggrieved child would come and report the wrong that had been done and expect the teacher to take immediate action to rectify the situation and re-establish the fair balance of justice these kids had come to expect from life. The teacher said it seemed like someone was tattling to her every few minutes. Tattle after tattle after tattle.

Someone, and I can’t remember if it was a teacher or the parent reporter, came up with an idea. The tattle phone. A place where the kids could report any and all injustices, grievances or unfairness that occurred in the classroom, or anywhere in their little 4-year-old worlds. They got what we would now consider an old fashioned phone – but one that anyone my age had in their house growing up. They mounted the phone on the wall of the classroom and connected it to some kind of recording device so they could monitor all that was going wrong in this nursery school classroom.

Immediately the calls started coming in. I think the teacher said in the first week there were sometimes lines formed as the kids waited to see how justice would rain down.

The podcast played some of the calls. These earnest little voices telling of what happened and who done it. The calls included much of what you might expect – “She looked at me funny!” “He hit me.” “They took my whatever,” and so on. Now I am not sure they did the full analysis of what the most common aggrievances were, but as I listened, there was one category that really stood out. It’s not fair. It’s not fair that they got to play with the big red ball. It’s not fair that I didn’t get an extra cookie. It’s not fair that I didn’t get to play with someone or something.

It’s not fair. We have all said it and will likely say it again. We seem to be born with a sense of fairness and a desire for it to become our reality. Our sense of fairness may be skewed, but it seems to come from a place that says I want what is mine, and I am ok with you getting what is yours – as long as you don’t get more than me. I remember one of the calls. “Billy and I were playing with blocks,” the little voice reported, “And he took more of the big ones than I had, so I couldn’t build a taller house.”

Our sense of fairness seems based on what we perceive to be available. If there had been no big blocks it might not have been an issue. If there had been more big blocks, it might not have been an issue. But there were only a few, and Billy got more.

We seem to be born with this deep sense of fairness and are regularly disturbed when our perception of what is fair is not met.

And this is the problem with God. Because, and you already know this, and I have said it before, God is not fair. God is not about having a few blocks and making sure everyone has the same number. God is about creating more of what we really need and showering it on us in abundance. An abundance that is unfair, unjust, unbalanced, and the most beautiful thing in the universe.

We sometimes get so hung up on not getting what we thought someone else got, that we fail to see what we have. We seem to think the universe has treated us unfairly when we don't get something we desire. We want something that someone else has even if it's not right for us.

We are born with this sense of fairness, and then try to make rules to ensure that the fairness continues. So many of our laws and rules seem to promote an idea of fairness in some way. Even the Ten Commandments, our most fundamental set of rules, carries elements of justice and fairness. And remember, the Ten Commandments are probably not as original as we might think. Ancient rules, from other civilizations that predate Moses, had similar guidelines to keep a fair balance in society.

It is one of the Ten commandments that is at the heart of the gospel today, but it is not the rule that Jesus questions, it is the execution of the rule. What Jesus seems to be doing is telling us that following the rules, and playing fair is not always the best way know where God is really leading us.

So let me try to explain this passage that kind of made my head twist a little bit. Now this is my interpretation, so I am sure this is not the only way to look at it. Jesus is of course talking about the commandment that we are to honor our mother and father. My mother, who is with us, will surely endorse this as a good thing. But then what Jesus is talking about, is how following the letter of the law, is not living into the deeper intention of God's law. How fair is not necessarily enough and that the devil can be found in the details, yet God a created a broader tapestry.

The child may say, I have made an offering to God that honors my father and mother. I have done enough. That may follow the

letter of the law, that may be fair, but it may not be right. God always expects more. If God models the love that we are to share, doing the bare minimum, may keep the law, but not the intention.

Now I do this kind of thing all the time when faced with something I don't really want to do. The last line of the Gospel where Jesus says, "And you do many things like this," is probably directed at me. There are so many times I have looked at rule and tried to figure out the least I could do. Following the letter of the law, to be fair, but not doing all that you could.

Remember, Jesus is always going to ask more of us. It is a challenge to break us open to possibilities with God. Fair is sometimes the easier solution, seemingly justified by our ingrained sense of fairness. But God does not call us to the easy, God calls us to justice and mercy that is beyond any law.

I know many of us looked at what came out from the Supreme Court this week, and probably shouted it's not fair, while others across the country felt like justice has been done. For those who are disparaging of the direction our country seems to be headed, this is the time to trust in God with our whole heart. We may not like this chapter, but it's not the end of the story. God's abundant love will persevere even if we can't see how. This is the wonder of God.

As we look at the how the law in our land has been interpreted, we need to use this lens of God's unfair and abundant love to shape our actions. Loving the unborn is an empty sentiment if we do not offer love and support to every individual at every stage in their life, especially those who carry the burden of this decision. The threats against the rights of our LGBTQ+ siblings may follow a fair conservative interpretation of the written

law, but do not allow space for the love of God.

God is not fair. God is love.

Fair is balanced and limited.

Love is abundant and extravagant.

Fair says I only have so much to give and here is your part.

Love says I will always have more to give.

Fair says we each get the same amount.

Love says you get what you need and more.

Fair is logical and rational and sensible.

Love is illogical, irritational and life giving.

God is calling us to a life of love, not a life of fairness. God is not fair, and we should not be fair either. Fair focuses on limited resources, and God is constantly reminding us that there is more than enough. So, my friends, don't be fair, be love. Live into the abundance of God's overflowing grace. Give all you can in love, and you won't be empty, you will be full. This means standing up for our siblings whose rights are being stripped or threatened. Don't worry that you are not enough. You will be filled by God, and it won't be fair, but it will be beautiful.