

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Philippians 1:21-27; Matthew 20:1-16

A grandmother tells her life story about growing up the oldest of four children. "My mother was always very fair," she said.

"She didn't play favorites. We always knew that we could count on her to be fair. But my father, well, that was another story.

The truth is, I grew up secure in the knowledge that I was 'Daddy's favorite.' I was the oldest, after all, and the only girl until my sister came along when I was thirteen. I figured it wasn't hurting anybody; my father loved all his children, and probably they never even knew that I was his favorite. But I knew, and that was enough for me." "But then one day," she continued, "after I was grown and married and a mother myself, I got into conversation with my brothers and sisters, and I was surprised, and a little bemused to learn, that each of them had also grown up with that same unspoken conviction. Each of us had always felt sure that he or she was 'Daddy's favorite.' How my father accomplished that, I'll never know!"

Sibling rivalry, of course, occurs in many families, especially when the children are young. Sometimes it even continues into adulthood. Those of us who are old enough, remember the famous line from the Smothers Brothers television show: "Mom always liked you best." It is as though the children feel there isn't enough love or attention or approval to go around, and so they must constantly compete for their fair share. What parent hasn't heard the pitiful cry, "But that's not fair!"?

These feelings and this kind of behavior can carry over into our other relationships. If we have learned to see life as some kind of a contest for power, wealth, approval, and fame, we will always be on the alert for things that are not fair, that is, situations in which we feel we are not given our just desserts.

We want to get the best grades, the best job, make the most money, have the nicest home or car. We strive to get ahead, we "look out for number one," we complain loudly, or perhaps silently, when favors go to someone we think less deserving than ourselves.

It's easy to understand the feelings of the vineyard workers in today's Gospel story who had worked all day in the vineyard under the hot sun. They had, of course, agreed to work for the usual daily wage. But when they saw those hired later in the day receiving the same amount, they were so sure that they would be rewarded more generously. They had worked 12 hours! Was it fair that those who had worked one hour received the same amount of pay as them? Obviously not! And so they grumbled. If we are honest with ourselves, we will probably have to admit that we would have grumbled, too. And maybe we have done so, in similar circumstances. Maybe these feelings even carry over into our relationship with God. We have more likely than not, known someone that we would like to see get the punishment he or she so richly deserved. Perhaps there are moments when we wish God wouldn't be quite so merciful, to others, that is.

It is amazing that there is jockeying for a position of favour or authority in the kingdom, even among those faithful followers of our Lord who pray, "thy kingdom come. Remember the request of James and John, who wanted to sit, one at the right hand, and one at the left, of Jesus in his kingdom. Remember how, after

the Resurrection, when Peter proclaimed his love for Jesus, and was told, "Feed my sheep," still had to ask, referring to the beloved disciple, "Lord, what about him?" And Jesus had to tell Peter, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me."

Look again at the beginning line of today's Gospel: "The kingdom of heaven is like...." What if God's kingdom is a place where there is no jockeying for position or favour? What if "fair" isn't even a word that can be used in God's kingdom, because in that kingdom each and every one of us is the Father's beloved child? What if the kingdom is a place where we don't get what we deserve, but rather a place where we get what our loving Father wants so much to give us? Everyone of us should thank God, and express our pleasure and happiness, that God is not fair. If God were fair and gave us what we truly deserve, we would be tortured slowly before being confined to hell for eternity.

What if God's infinite love, grace and mercy, all of it, is poured out on each of us and no matter how much we get, all of it is still available to us? What if everybody gets the best seat in God's kingdom because we all get the place that is prepared especially for us? If that is the case, we wouldn't want to trade places with anyone, would we? If this is the kind of kingdom for which we pray, "thy Kingdom come," then it is up to us to help make it happen, insofar as it is possible, here on earth. What if we really forgave others their trespasses, in the knowledge that God forgives us, and them? What might happen if we stopped worrying about whether we were getting our fair share and, instead, recognized each of our brothers and sisters as God's beloved child? What would be the results if we made ourselves available to be instruments of God's love to these other

children of God, not worrying about what they did, or did not deserve? What if, when we are treated unfairly, we would rejoice because it reminds us that God loves us beyond human understanding.

Then, what if we do something to make those who treat us unfairly feel really crazy by forgiving them and sharing with them the love we have received.

What if we would earnestly pray to God that He would show us how He wants to use us, and that we would listen to His guidance, and follow it in our lives? Actually, when all is said and done, that's what the kingdom of heaven is really like.

AMEN.