

26th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Divine Fairness Part II”

Fr. Frank Schuster

The readings this weekend feel like a continuation from last week. Last Sunday, we were introduced to the idea that God’s ways are not our ways. Our sense of justice is not always God’s sense of justice. I say this because our first reading from Ezekiel begins, “Thus says the Lord: You say, ‘The Lord’s way is not fair!’ Hear now, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?”

We are right back to our conversation about justice we had last week. How often is our definition of justice, “just us” or “just me”? The definition of fairness in our world is often about whatever situation benefits me the most, often times at the expense of others. The world’s economy is clearly set up that way. Brass tacks, much of what we wear on our bodies or use in terms of technology are all too often assembled by people who live in impoverished conditions. That is just a statement of fact. We go through our lives trying not to think about it or simply get exasperated at the enormity of it all and say, “What else am I supposed to do? I need to have shoes. I need to have technology to function in this culture. I am on budget. I have a family. Things are expensive.” It can be way too uncomfortable to think otherwise. And please know that I am not judging anybody right now or trying to offer political solutions. I am not that smart. I am just simply raising the questions that I struggle with in light of the readings this weekend and hope that you will too.

I mention all of this in part because there is so much talk about systemic injustice in our country right now. It is an important conversation and a much needed one. It is good that we are having it and it is overdue. I say that because I do not want to take anything away from the statement, “Black Lives Matter”. Of course they do. I just personally wish the national conversation would include that...but also extend beyond our borders, or at least to Eastern Washington to all the migrant workers who are paid miniscule amounts without many benefits if any so that we can have cheaper apples. I looked it up last week. A migrant worker harvesting our produce might be paid something like \$13.50 an hour¹. Try raising a family on that. Meanwhile, migrant farmers are deemed essential workers by the State of Washington. This essentially forces them to work during the pandemic or not get paid. We justify it all saying that they are making more money here than what they would be making at home. And there is truth to that argument which underscores a need I think for us all to reevaluate our definition of fairness, not just locally but globally. Ezekiel will not let us off the hook, “Thus says the Lord...Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?”

And so, what is fairness? Happily, St. Paul has a definition of fairness in our second reading. He says, “Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others.” How about that? “Humbly regard others as more important than yourselves”. That’s fairness. Again, the image that God wants to give us when we talk about justice or fairness is that

¹ <https://projectpulso.org/2020/08/17/migrant-farmworkers-fight-for-overtime-pay-amid-high-covid-19-risks-in-washington-state/>

(pointing at the cross). God offers himself totally and completely to us on the cross for the sake of our salvation. That is God's commentary on justice. Jesus understood fairness as regarding us as being more important than himself. Jesus challenges us to love others in the same way he loved us.

The Gospel reading furthers the conversation in that the Lord isn't interested in just conversation. You have two sons. One said that he would do the work and ended up not doing it. The other son said that he wouldn't do the work but then did it anyway. Which one did the Father's will? Clearly, the one whose actions spoke louder than his words. Actions speak louder than words.

What does that mean for us during the times in which live? All the problems that the world faces right now can seem so very overwhelming, at least for me. However, we all know what our patroness would say. Instead of trying to solve everything ourselves in one day, we should focus instead on doing little things with great love. That was Mother Teresa's motto when faced with all the poverty she encountered in Calcutta. Life isn't about doing great things, but about doing little things with great love. Those little things add up if enough people put their words into action. Furthermore, that piece about love being our motivation is extremely important in my view. If the world's problems are not solved from a place of love, one injustice will simply be traded for another. That is what sinners do.

So, what does it mean to be a disciple who approaches the issues of the day from a place of love? For me personally, this is when the words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi seems so very timely and appropriate. As disciples of Jesus, even in the most difficult times that we find ourselves in, we are nevertheless still called to preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words. If we took that message to heart, we could then perhaps take some time today and simply ask ourselves, "What does that look like for me this week?"