

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time “About Justice”

Bishop Frank Schuster

My friends, when was the last time you approached God with a question regarding fairness? When was the last time you wondered aloud to God why some people’s lives are, by your point of view, somehow better or worse than your own? The Gospel today has perhaps the most unpopular parables of the Lord. You have this landowner who hires several groups of day workers, at different times during the day, to work in his vineyard. The first group begins work at dawn and the second group begins work later that morning. The third group begins work at noon and the last group in the late afternoon. At the end of the day, the landowner pays them all the same. I think our sense of justice would side with the group of workers who were there all day. Why should those who only worked an hour be paid the same as those who were there from daybreak?

You know who really understands the dilemma that the parable today gives us? Children! I learned a long time ago that it is very important for me as an uncle and cousin to make sure my gifts to the kids in the family are equitable. The reason for this is because children have finely honed justice radars built into their systems. Parents know about this built in justice radar all too well. Whenever the justice radar in a child gets triggered, a child can be the first to say, or even scream, the words we hear in households all over Christendom, “It’s not fair!”

When we listen to Jesus’ parable today of those who only work an hour getting paid the same as those who worked all day, the inner child inside of us wants to cry out “It’s not fair”. Of course, in the presence of God, we are all like children, right? Jesus taught us to be like children in the presence of God who is our heavenly parent. The words of the prophet Isaiah are therefore a good reminder. Isaiah says, “Thus says the Lord, my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.” God is often like a parent dealing with children. Jesus even teaches us to call God “Abba”, a word that is best translated as “daddy” rather than “father”.

How do we kids define justice? When we think of the word justice, we think of what is rightfully due us and due others. This is a reasonable definition. There is a lot of social injustice in our world that needs to be recognized, addressed, and even fought against. As Catholics, we are called to fight for justice, with conviction, with a preferential option for the poor, and a spirit of non-violence like Jesus did. However, we must be careful that our fairness radars do not turn our quest for “justice” into “just us” or “just me”? That is how we sinners operate.

A way of understanding this, the historical context behind Jesus’ parable has to do with how the Church in the first century regarded converts from other faiths than Judaism. The Jews were the first in the “story of salvation”, so the question in the early Church became: how do we treat all the non-Jews, who were called Gentiles, who want to join this new Christian Church? Should they first become Jewish before becoming Christian? The Good News is whether we find ourselves in the story of salvation early in the day or late in the day, God loves us all equally and

wants us to receive the same gift of salvation offered to all regardless of where we live, where we were born, or what faith we started out in.

And so, let's go back to the question I led off with: when was the last time you approached God with a question regarding fairness? When was the last time you wondered aloud to God why some people's lives are, by your point of view, somehow better or worse than your own? Like I said earlier, there is injustice in our world that Jesus expects us to stand up against and become forces for change. However, before we go about doing that, it is best to remember that biblically, justice was not narrowly defined as just about fairness between people, although that is part of it. Biblically, justice was first and foremost was about the people being in right relationship with God. That is what justice means biblically. What all this is to say is: when we work for justice in this world, we must not lose sight of God's commentary regarding justice behind me here on the wall. Ask yourself: Is that fair? I think if we spent enough time contemplating the cross, we might come to a different conclusion as to what is just in God's eyes.

Christians, we all have our gifts, we all have our struggles, and we all have our crosses to carry. However, if we convert our hearts and follow Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life, what good news it is to know that his gift of salvation is available to all regardless of who we are or where we live. Therefore, perhaps the best way for Christians to define justice isn't "just us" or "just me", but rather, "just Jesus".