

Is God Fair?

Year C, Proper 19 - Luke 15:1-10

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 15, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Some of you have heard me ask it before, but our Lectionary readings this morning again call the question: Is God Fair?

I think most of us would agree that, in general, *life* is not fair. Every time we open the paper or turn on the tube or glance at the app or newsfeed widget, it seems that those who lie and hurt and steal *seem* to get over, that cheaters sure *seem* to prosper, and that the good folk get the shaft – or the early grave. It's pretty clear that life is *not* fair, but with the folks in this morning's Gospel reading, we sometimes still wonder, is *God* fair?

The religious people, the ones who had tried to follow all the rules got mad at Jesus. Here he was spending all his time and working miracles and wonders with *sinner*s. The church people grumbled, "That's not fair! We've done the right thing all our lives. We've kept the Ten Commandments. We've washed our hands before we've eaten. We've been meticulously careful not to work on the Sabbath." "We are all here in Sunday School this morning where we're *supposed* to be instead of snuggled up, sleeping in. We're at Wednesday night suppers and we even stay for the program – if it's something interesting. We're here listening to this sermon – for pity's sake, make it a short one – when we could be out somewhere enjoying this wonderful day." "We've gone to church and paid our dues," those people said. "We've tried to do right, and what does this maybe messiah do? He goes and hangs out with prostitutes and tax collectors." "He sits down and eats with thieves and sinners – instead of with us." "We've *earned* the Lord's attention and love. And those other ones? They haven't, have they? That's why they're the ones who are lost! And yet he teaches them, and he feeds them, and he heals *them*. That's just not fair!"

Those folks were grumbling and mumbling, so, of course, Jesus tells them a story. "Which one of you," he begins, "having a hundred sheep and losing one does not leave the ninety-nine and look for the one that is lost?" We hear this little story and we skip right over to the next part because we've heard it so many times it just kind of goes without thinking. We've seen it in our beddy-by picture Bibles, and in hundreds of Sunday School lessons, and maybe even in glorious stained glass.

This little story, though, might have rung a bit differently with the people who heard it the first time – you know, people who actually *knew* a little something about sheep shepherding. Because of course, a *prudent* shepherd, having finally reached the relative safety of the campfire for the night would concentrate on the other ninety-nine to make sure none of *them* got away. But the shepherd in Jesus' story says, "I'll have to go back and look for the one that's lost." "In this weather? That doesn't make any sense. If we don't get down to the lower pastures soon, we'll *all* die of exposure!" A *practical* shepherd would figure he needed to keep an eye on the other ninety-nine. "I *have* to find her," Jesus' shepherd says. "After all the wolves the last few nights, there's no chance in the world that she's still alive. Even if she is, after all this time, she'll be half dead from terror and exhaustion. She'll never be any good to you again." A *fair* shepherd would cut his losses and take care of the sheep that had *not* wandered off. "You don't understand," says Jesus' shepherd. "She's one of *mine*. If there's even half a chance that she's still alive, I *have* to go back. I *have* to find her. I *have* to bring her home!"

A *fair* shepherd wouldn't play those kinds of odds. But Jesus' story isn't about that *fair* shepherd. Jesus' imprudent shepherd went back out searching for that one lost lamb. His impractical shepherd *found* that lamb and coaxed her out of her wolf-besieged terror to come to

him. That *unfair* shepherd comforted that one lost lamb and cherished her and nursed her, step by step by halting step.

Is God *fair*? Think about it. Fair means giving people what they are due. A fair judge sentences people according to the severity of their crimes, the more violent or vile the crime, the more severe the punishment. A fair merchant charges the same price for everyone, a price that's based on the value of the goods sold or the services rendered. A fair referee uses the same rules to call the same fouls against both teams and shows no favor to one team over the other. That's always a good illustration on Sundays in football season.

Is God *fair*? Dear friends, do you realize what it means that not only does God love his errant, prideful, sinful flock enough to save the whole world, but that God loves *each* lost sheep enough to leave all of heaven to seek out just *one*, to find *just one* – to seek *you* out – to find *me*?

There have been times in *my* life when I didn't know *where* I wanted to go or *what* I wanted to do. There have been times when I have just kind of carelessly wandered away from a close relationship with the Shepherd. There have been times when I have nibbled at what I thought were greener pastures until I had lost my way. And, to be honest, there have been times when I knew full well that I was heading the wrong way, when I knew full well that the path I had chosen was the one that led to danger and isolation and destruction – and I went there anyway.

Based on our definition of “fair,” we would have been sentenced according to the severity of our crimes, and the entire human race would have long ago been wiped from whatever was left of history. If God were *fair*, the price we would have been charged would be far beyond our ability to ever pay. If God were *fair*, all our fouls would have been charged against us and we would have been out of the game a long, long time ago.

Instead, our sentence has been vacated, our debt has been declared “paid in full,” the flag has been picked up off the field – and thrown away somewhere. Nope! It's pretty clear that God is *not* fair. Instead, God is *merciful*. Instead, God is *faithful*. Instead of being fair, God is *gracious* beyond all bounds! God's love for the lost knows no limits. God's love for *us* knows no limits. God's love for *me*, and his love for *you*, and for *you*, and for *you*, knows *no* limits. For when the lost is found, Jesus tells us – oh, the rejoicing over that one who has returned! Oh, the laughter and the singing around the campfire when *every* precious lamb has been brought home! In the words of one of the favorites at the Sunday evening singings of my youth, when Jeremiah's stupid child has once again been found and brought home, “It's *shoutin'* time in heaven!”

It is in the context of that amazing grace, that we bring to our Father the best that we have to give. It is in the context of the Lord's boundless, unmerited mercy, that we offer our thanks and praise. It is in the context of God's excessive, exorbitant, *extravagant* love for us, that we offer to the Good Shepherd our hearts and our minds and our hands.

Is God fair? Nope! God is *God*, and God is *good*, and God is *gracious*, *all* the time. And thanks *be* to God!