

God is Not Fair!

March 14, 2010: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

The Rev. Peter Faass

We have just heard one of the best known parables of Jesus, namely, "The Prodigal Son." The late Henri Nouwen wrote one of the definitive studies of this well-known biblical story. Using Rembrandt's painting of the same name, Nouwen examines each of the three main characters - the Father, the elder son and the Prodigal - as well as the two unidentified figures in the shadows of Rembrandt's painting, but which are not mentioned in the original text. Having lived much of his life among the Jews of Amsterdam, I think Rembrandt engaged in some clandestine, artistic midrash here.

In his book, "The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming" Nouwen encourages the reader to think of which character they are in the story. Ultimately Nouwen leads us to see us in all of them.

It is my experience that many people respond to this question by saying they see themselves as the Prodigal Son. This is very interesting, but not truly accurate. I think some ego is at play in that response. While none of us is perfect, few of us - unless we are Wall St. Traders - have been nearly as profligate as the prodigal son. He was a really bad boy. I think this response belies a certain whist-fullness or revisionist history that desires to convey more wildness or hedonistic experience than is actually true.

Many people also see themselves as the figure of the Father. This too is interesting. It is the rare person who is as forgiving, non-judgmental and radically loving as the Father in this story. The most recent example of the father's behavior being manifested in the world was by the Amish community in Lancaster, Pennsylvania a few years ago after the murderous rampage carried out against ten school girls there. That community truly incarnated the forgiveness and radical love of the father in their response to the murderer.

Most of us tend to be reluctant in offering forgiveness; we are judgmental and fall short of offering radical love. We may hold these qualities up as lofty goals, but they are not our day to day behavior.

The truth be told, I think most of our operation systems use the Elder Son software. We *really* like this soft ware. The Elder Son software confirms our sense of outrage and effrontery at what has taken place in the parable of "The Prodigal Son." After all the Father's response to the return of this squandering, debauched, besotted son is preposterous and counter-intuitive. Who would do such a thing? It's irrational.

After partying like Hugh Hefner on steroids and losing his entire inheritance, this kid is driven by starvation to return home. He decides to beg for mercy from his dad. Okay, we think, maybe, just maybe, we might let him come back, but certainly not with any status. He's stained the family name and frittered away tons of the family estate. While we may not let him starve and acquiesce to his working in the fields, wearing rags and eating gruel, he's certainly not sleeping in his old bed. We think that being an indentured servant is what he deserves and that's erring on the merciful side!

But the Father doesn't see it that way. Spotting his lost child on the horizon one afternoon, "his father was filled with compassion; he ran to him" - remember this is no spring chicken here, yet such was his excitement he runs pell-mell - and he, "put[s] his arms around him and kissed him." Then the father instructs his servants to bring out a fine robe, sandals and a ring, thereby restoring him to full status in the family. And as if that isn't enough he orders a feast be prepared so they can party like its 1999.

Arriving back home from laboring all day, the elder son hears the party music, sees the disco ball twirling and smells the delicious roasted fatted calf as it turns on the spit. And he wonders just what the hell is going on, after-all it's not Rosh ha-Shanah. Upon inquiring with one of the servants and learning the cause of all the hoopla, the elder son is infuriated. He confronts his father and he complains bitterly about how the father has welcomed home this worthless, scandalous brother of his.

He tells his father that it's just not fair. Not fair that he should be so enthusiastic and generous toward this scamp son of his.

Not fair because he, the elder son, has been loyal and hard-working. Not fair because the rebellious younger son gets all the attention while he, the faithful elder son, gets bupkis. This is not how life is supposed to work, he says. It's just not fair.

And the Elder Son software that we have installed on our hard drive reaffirms this belief as well; this parable is just not fair. Oh yes, and that God must be crazy.

And that's the rub, because this assessment is absolutely correct. This story is not fair; not by a long shot. And God is crazy . . . crazy for love. But you see the problem is not with the story, it's with us. This parable is not about fairness. In fact God in Jesus doesn't give one good hoot an' a holler about fairness; certainly not as we humans apply fairness. In fact God sees that as a problem.

Ideally fairness means making sure each person is treated in an identical manner. But our preponderance to judge severely and to not love skews our ability to be truly fair. Ergo, human fairness is, well, seldom fair.

Members of Congress get platinum health insurance coverage while 45 million residents of this nation have none. That's hardly fair -- but try telling that to a member of Congress who seems to think it's fair enough.

Employees of Wall Street have reaped billions in bonuses even when their companies lose billions of other people's money. That's hardly fair, but try telling that to a Wall Street trader who think it's very fair.

12% of the world's population lives in North America and Western Europe, yet the people of these two places account for 60% of the world's consumer consumption. In the mean time 2.8 billion people - almost a 1/3 of the earth's population - struggle to survive on less than \$2.00 a day. That's hardly fair, but try telling that to Western Europeans or North Americans.

This is why God doesn't care about our sense of fairness; God never has and never will. We base fairness on our personal feelings and wants and we are all too reliable in erring toward being very generous toward our own causes. We fail to be objective in determining fairness. If God were to abandon the world and allow it to operate in the context of the human application of fairness, it would be an even more hellish place than it currently is.

So if you want a God who is fair, you better seek else where. The God in Jesus is not fair, not by a long-shot.

Instead, the God in Jesus goes to the town square several times throughout the day to hire laborers. And then at the end of the day God pays each one the same wage, regardless of whether they worked twelve hours or one. And those who worked the longest protest about how unfair that is!

The God in Jesus tells a sincere man who has diligently followed all the laws of his faith that he lacks one thing; he needs to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. That young man then walks away shaking his head at the lack of fairness of it all.

The God in Jesus dines with rip-off artists, tax collectors, the hoi polloi, women of ill-repute, the riffraff of his day; people who completely failed to meet the requirements of what it meant to be an upright model citizen and religious person. And Jesus tells those affronted by his association with them that these sinners will get to heaven before they do because they have seen the error of their ways and entered into right relationship with God. And the response by the well-heeled, "good" people is well, that's just not fair.

The God in Jesus welcomes with abundant joy a prodigal child, restoring him to full status as a member of God's family. And his brother whines, that's not fair.

This is the God we have in Jesus. None of these things are fair by our standards; but what they are is just, because while God is not concerned with our idea of fairness, God is passionate about justice and righteousness for all people. The prophet Micah expresses this passion well: "[God] has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

That's the software we need to install on our hard drives.

Social and economic justice – which is exactly what God in Jesus is passionate about - is a hard sell for many people. It certainly is for the extremist, inflammatory television host Glenn Beck. You may have heard that Beck recently spoke out against this passion of God.

Last week on his program Beck set out to convince his audience that "social justice," the term many Christian churches use to describe their efforts to address poverty and human rights, is a "code word" for communism and Nazism. Beck urged Christians to discuss the term with their clergy and to leave their churches if leaders would not reconsider their emphasis on social justice.

"I'm begging you," he said, “. . . look for the words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!"

My sisters and brothers in faith, I too say run when you hear the words social or economic justice. Run. Run as fast as you can. Run pell-mell. Run with all your heart, and soul and mind and strength. Run right **toward** those issues of justice and righteousness for all God's children. In so doing you will be running right into the arms of God.

Amen.