

Grumbling and Fairness – The Rev. Debra Slade
St. Francis, Stamford – September 20, 2020

When I was discussing the Gospel reading this week with my daughter Emma, she told me a story of a time when she was younger and away at an Evangelical Christian summer camp. While there was probably too much bible study then she would have liked, the place had excellent grounds, activities, kindly camper leaders, and great food. In fact, she said the food was so good, that many campers would arrive much earlier than the time the doors opened for meals, just to be able to get in there to eat without having to wait for campers ahead of them. Emma said she was always okay hanging out at the back of the line and letting others go ahead of her. The main reason, she said, was that she did not like the crowds at the front of the line, and also because there was always enough food for everyone no matter when you got into the cafeteria. One day, the camp leaders decided to go to the back of the line where Emma was, and let those campers come into the cafeteria through a side entrance, and eat before those in the front of the line. And, you might not be surprised to learn that this caused much dismay and grumbling from the eager beaver campers who had come early to secure their spot at the front of the line. When they approached their leaders with their complaints, you won't be surprised to learn, that they were reminded what Jesus told them in Matthew's parable of the laborers in the field that "the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:16). Fair or unfair, you ask? Well, this sermon's about that-- and also about grumbling.

We just heard two very curious scripture readings where people are grumbling because they feel they have suffered an injustice when some other people are given something that the grumblers feel they do not deserve. In the case of the odd, and some say laughable prophet Jonah, he redeems himself by eventually going to the city of Ninevah, known for its wickedness and cruelty, an enemy of Israel and through his preaching gets them to repent, but then Jonah turns around and is annoyed that God does not destroy the people there! Yes, Jonah is mad that God has compassion and concern for the people there. I guess Jonah is thinking – "Those Ninevites -- they did not get what they deserved!" In our parable of the laborers in the field, the workers who worked all day for the amount they expected to get are annoyed because the workers who came at the end, and only worked for one hour, got the same amount of money that they did. Again, those laborers are grumbling about someone else who they feel did not get what they deserved – ie they should have received less money than they did. In both cases, if we read the landowner as a stand in for God, God is being generous to the people of Ninevah, and generous to the labors who get the same amount of money as the others. These decisions of God did not hurt Jonah or the grumbling laborers personally, instead it was seeing others benefit from God's generosity and compassion that made them mad.

How very human it is though, to react like Jonah and the laborers. The times we are living in right now seem like a very cruel moment in history when nothing seems fair, and when certainly many people are not getting what they deserve. I don't know about you, but I have been doing a fair bit of grumbling and complaining about the inconveniences of the pandemic upon my life, and because of both the randomness and unfairness of who does or does not get the virus. The pandemic has revealed, more than anything, how our society seems set up to

not protect and save those who need it the most – those who many might label, for argument’s sake – the last.

The thing about grumbling, the thing about being envious of others, the thing about bitterness, well, these are all things that make us human. And, it makes me so comforted to know that in the kingdom of heaven, God accepts our humanness and loves us unconditionally -- no matter what. Does anyone remember that poem by Max Ehrmann called *Desiderata* that advised one on various ways to live your life? For those listening to music in the early seventies, a spoken word record of it came out by a Les Crane who was a TV host at that time. Perhaps because I listened to the radio so much as a kid, the words of that poem have been etched on my brain’s hard drive, and the line from it that I go to quite frequently when I feel bitter, put upon, or what my Dad would call – “hard done by” is: “If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.” Right now it is hard to figure out what is fair, and it seems even harder to make decisions about what to do when everything seems filled with consequences that are out of our control. Knowing that our God is one of compassion and love is one of the greatest comforts we have in one of the most lamentable of times. And grumbling, I say, if it helps -- well, do it! God understands and will forgive and love you, in spite of it all.

As we make sense of how God rewards the last who appear to have done the least, we need only look as far as our own lives to remember that the hierarchy of what makes one “first” or “last” is very arbitrary and capricious, indeed. Racism and all forms of discrimination and oppression have created a world where those who might want the opportunity to work for the “usual daily wage” never got or will get the opportunity to do so. Are those who are disabled not entitled to have food, shelter, and healthcare because they cannot do certain things the same way someone can without a disability? As we all age, we experience many losses of functioning -- physically and mentally – and does this mean, because we can’t work as long or stand up as long as someone else – we are no longer valuable or deserving? Sadly, so much of our world has become so individualistic and transactional that we have lost the idea that we are all part of one community that should want the best for everyone, and that will take care of everyone. For in God’s kingdom of heaven on earth **there is enough for everyone**, and God’s compassion and love should serve as the model for us to try our hardest to make that happen here and now -- **for everyone**.

No one better exemplified that in her life and in her work as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whose death we mourn this weekend. She strove to make decisions that were fair and just, but also with the bigger picture in mind, that the world has not always treated people fairly, and that injustice needs correction. In my mind, she couldn’t describe the kingdom of heaven better when she said: “To make life a little better for people less fortunate than you, that’s what I think a meaningful life is. One lives not just for oneself but for one’s community.” Making lasts first, and then making a community without firsts and lasts is something that shall be her legacy. And, may we all, with Christ’s help, join with her and do the same. **Amen**