

Justice

Today's readings provide a path for us to explore, to get the sense of, and to experience the justice of God, a type of justice so very different than our own.

And if we listen carefully, we may be given a glimpse of how we might turn from a life lived immersed in human justice, into a life that participates in the justice of God.

You may be saying, "Now hold on, the only thing I hear Jesus talking about here is prayer."

But that's because you aren't practicing your *Greek*!

Because the word in *Greek* for "justice" is found 6 times in today's very short Gospel lesson.

So what is it about human justice and God's justice?

In the first place, we humans love to push out of the picture the Living, passionate, "in your face" God of both the Old and New Testaments - to replace God with Rules and Regulations - with capital R's -- and then to bow low, pretending that the Rules and Regulations *are* God.

That's the whole deal with Paul condemning the Law, not because there's a thing wrong with the Law, but because they made, and we make, an idol of the Law: staying (for the most part) within the straight and narrow (at least as we straightly and narrowly define it) -- but doing so very often with hearts as cold as ice.

We weren't created simply to be law abiders, we were created for far more than that: we were created to be lovers - of each other, of all of humanity, and of this, God's very good creation.

Jesus knows well our love affair with rules and regulations, and so he spends his entire ministry engaging in outrageous actions, like, kicking the bankers out of the Temple and raising the dead and making community with people long since told they have no place in polite society; and by telling outrageous stories, like the priest and

the sinner who go up to pray, with only the sinner coming down justified by God, like the hated Samaritan whose compassion shames the righteous piety of the church minister.

Jesus says and does these things in order to help us see that the living God is not about rules and regulations: what the living God is about is that we find ways to love each other, to reach out to each other, to be in relationships of kindness with each other.

And because of that, the Reality, also with a capital R, that Jesus invites us into isn't so much focused on heaven up there or a disembodied spiritual realm; Jesus, you see, tends to point not so much upward as outward.

Not so much toward heaven after death, but insisting that if you really want to enter the ultimate Reality, the Reality occupied by God, the Reality Jesus calls the Kingdom of God, if that's what you're really longing for, the way in is right here, standing before our eyes, now, beckoning you, beckoning me, to come inside.

While some teach detachment and others teach reincarnation and still others long for paradise after death, in Jesus, God becomes a human being, here, on this earth, and does everything possible to turn us around, so we might become the *human* beings God made us to be, from the very beginning.

You hear a lot from some evangelicals about his second coming that is coming any day.

The rapture, they say, will take the elect up to heaven, they say, so why bother with matters of peace or poverty or ecology or justice: God's taking all believers to heaven, leaving a hell on earth.

But these claims aren't rooted in our history or in our traditions or in scripture for that matter.

As one fellow puts it, perhaps when that day comes, maybe God will take those self proclaimed believers into heaven, but once there, God will leave them there and come and make his home on earth, with all of the left behind folks, here, on God's beloved earth -- created and nurtured and loved by God.

You see, God seems to prefer the folks who are left behind: the poor, the immigrant, the prisoner and yes, the widow.

Today we have the parable about a feisty widow and a corrupt judge.

And it is in part a story about persistent prayer.

A corrupt judge who cares less about what God or people think finally gives in to a pest, "so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."

The literal translation puts it this way: "Lest she give me a black eye!"

And Jesus tells us, "Look, if even this crook will give something good, how much more will God give, who made you and loves you and seeks only what is best for you?"

But there is another window opened by this parable; one that allows us to take a peek at the justice of God.

And in that peeking, what we begin to see is that God is very much like the unjust judge.

God is very much like a judge who doesn't give two hoots what other people think about when and how and on whom he exercises his justice.

Which brings up the question: "What does God's justice look like?"

And for that, we need to look at Jesus; because it is in Jesus that we encounter God, up close and personal.

And when we get up close and personal with Jesus, we find he's not a very good judge at all, at least by our standards of justice.

There's the arrogant son who demands his share of the inheritance before dear old dad is even dead, only to blow it and come crawling back with rags for clothes and 30 lbs lighter from starvation, only to have his confession ignored and the party of the year thrown in his honor.

Then there's the unjust steward who's caught with his hand in the till, and even when he cuts even more into the boss's profit by giving great deals to the folks who owe money; the boss praises him for thinking creatively.

And then there's Jesus himself: *God incarnate, God in the flesh.*

What we expect from *God* is a swooping down, knocking some heads together, and setting us straight.

We're looking for some more partings of the Red Sea and some handy dandy smiting of the bad guys.

But what we get from Jesus is the rude awakening that there are no good guys and no bad guys.

We are all good and bad, all tangled up in ourselves, like weeds and wheat planted together, and try as we might, we've neither the skill nor the ability to do the separating ourselves.

Thankfully, we don't get, in Jesus, a smiting *God*.

What we get instead is a *God* who is nailed to a tree, who hangs smelling of blood and sweat, who looks down on we who did this only to say: "Father, forgive them...."

You'll agree that a respectable *God* would slap our heads, knock us down, or do what it takes to make everyone shape up.

That's what I'd do if I were *God*!

Instead, we get Jesus, who points to prodigal sons and unjust stewards and corrupt judges and says: "See, this is what *God* is like."

He forgives even before he's asked.

He excuses the worst things.

And instead of whipping us into shape, he hangs, bloodied and heavy, there on the cross, looking down on the whole sorry mess we have created in our self-

justification, in our endless schemes to measure up, in our countless efforts to be on top: trying to win at the game of life.

And this ridiculous God looks down on us from the agony of the cross and says ever so simply: "Forgive."

But if you think this all starts only with Jesus, you'd be wrong in that thinking.

The God who stops at nothing to have every last one of us; and not just us, but the Taliban and Al Qaeda and even members of Congress (yes, the love of God reaches even those depths!)-- God is always on this hunt for us all, for every last one of us....

We see it today in Jeremiah's ancient promise to his people, a people who have for years chased after idols and worshipped beer cans and utterly rejected the God who freed them from slavery.

And here is what this rejected, despised, scorned, God has to say to those who have rejected, despised and scorned him:

"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

It's a totally one-sided deal.

God recommitting himself to these people, to all of them, to all of us.

God cancels all debts, releases all sins, and writes his truth on their, on our, hearts.

No quid pro quo.

No shaping up and flying right by us.

Only a bad judge, one who cares less what people think, can let rotten people off the hook with such ease.

Only a strange God can throw a party for a prodigal; praise a corrupt and thieving steward; leave 99 sheep to the dangers of wolves to go after the one with the bad sense to get himself lost....

This is the "God [who] shows his love for us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Rom 5:8

And you gotta ask yourself: Is this a God I want to know?

Because, when we get right down to it, this God who endlessly forgives, who turns the other cheek countless times, who truly does love his enemies, this looks like a loser's God.

"And there, if you will, is the ultimate dilemma of the church.

I can stand here in the pulpit and tell you that God is angry, mean, and nasty; I can tell you he is so good you can't come within a million miles of him; or I can whip you into a frenzy of trying to appease God with remorse and good behavior -- with sacrifices.....and you won't bat an eye.

But I cannot stand here and tell you the truth that God couldn't care less about sacred guilt or precious lists of good deeds, or responsible outlooks, or earnest good intentions.

I can't say that God has cancelled all sacrifices, cancelled all efforts to deserve or earn your way into God's good graces: instead giving everyone a free entry ticket into the Kingdom of God, the only criteria being, you want to come in.

I can't say any of this to you, because, if I do, you can conclude only one of two things: either I am crazy, or God is." Capon, *Parables of Grace*, 335 (paraphrased).

Unless we can get to that place where, standing before the mirror of God's gentle judgment, I can see myself as one of the lost, as the prodigal, as the one who needs so very much to be found.

And here we come to the intersection in today's parable; the intersection between prayer and entering the world of God's foolish judgment.

If we wish to change allegiances from human justice to a life lived in the cool forgiving breezes of God's judgment, we must needs pray.

Pray for what you need.

Pray for your hopes and dreams.

Besiege God with your prayers, for yourself, for others, for the world.

No relationship exists without talking story, so talk story with God: persistently, daily, hourly and often.

Bring your authentic self to God; that which you are proud of and that which you are ashamed of.

But pray also in silence.

Sit in the silence of God, experiencing the embrace of God in holy silence.

Offer every care, every anger, every sense of human justice to God, and you will be flabbergasted at how God transforms all of it into something entirely new.

Over time, you may come to see that the justice of God does not condemn, it heals, it redeems, it restores and renews --

Because **we are** the prodigal, **we are** the lost, **we are** that mixture of wheat and weeds that so desperately needs the healing judgment of God which at long last brings us to life, which at long last finds us, untangles and redeems us --

And so my friends, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching." 2 Tim 4:1.

Let us live our lives bathed in the loving, redemptive, persistent, yet always healing judgment of God.

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