

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you are the bearer of eternal life. You call us toward wholeness, the wholeness we can only find with devotion to you and your everlasting principles. You freely give us the life that has no end and call us forth to serve with love and compassion. Sometimes, God, we find that what we want conflicts with the path you call us toward. Sometimes, God, we find that the world gives us grief and pain in the midst of our faithful service. Sometimes, God, we find that it's just not fair and we don't know what to do. We pray to know when we lounge in comfort to find the challenge of faithfulness. We pray to know in our mourning and challenge the comfort of your gracious presence. Precious God, we pray for wisdom, an open mind, and an open heart to truly understand the difference between the two and to walk along the faithful path each day.

Gracious God, we pray for others and ourselves; we pray for those moments when it's just not fair by the way life shapes up or the way we respond to the calling of faithfulness. Let us challenge ourselves and others when the mentality becomes too much of the Rich Young Man. Let us comfort those who suffer pain and mourning like the longsuffering Job, and help us all to find the faithful place in the middle. We pray all these things in the name of the one who challenges us in our comfort and comforts us in our challenge, the Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as one...

SERMON

There's a phrase you learn when you are young, and, especially, have a sibling: "It's just not fair." If you're a younger sibling, it's not fair because the older sibling or siblings get more freedoms than you do. If you're an older sibling, your parents love the younger sibling or siblings more. It leads to fights, it leads to struggle, it leads to bad feelings

because, well, it's just not fair. We say it all the time. "It's just not fair." Fair. It's an appeal to an equal standard in an unequal world. It's an appeal to an absolute law in a lawless world. It's an appeal to a just God who doesn't always work in the way we want God to work. And you know what? It's often not right. It's not always in our ability to control, but it is within our ability to have the best response.

We have two difficult and seemingly different stories here, one from the hard life of Job and one from the ministry of Jesus Christ. They seem to preach two different messages, but they might have a more similar theme than it seems. As each person speaks their piece, they are both thinking "It's just not fair!" And that is so true. We say it so many ways in life. We can take a hard line with the mentality of "just deal with it" when rough times come and others don't respond the way we want them to, but with Christian life, depending on the topic, it requires two reactions. Sometimes that requires challenge, and other times it requires comfort. Let us hear the stories of the Rich Young Man who speaks to Jesus as well as the longsuffering Job, who both said in their special ways, "It's just not fair!" and we will see how each requires a different reaction and course to live faithfully.

This is a famous and hard to understand passage from the ministry of Jesus Christ. He meets a rich man along the way, and that man asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life, "the life of the ages," as it is most faithfully translated from the Greek. Jesus, the text says, recounts the commandments to honor the father and mother, do not steal, do not lie, do not defraud, do not commit adultery, do not murder. "I've done all of these always!" the man says, thinking he has won the day. Jesus loves him and responds that he is missing one thing: sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. "You will then have treasure in heaven;" says Jesus, "then come and follow me." The man is grieved, shocked, the text

says, and walks away defeated. I bet as he is walking away, he screams in his head “It’s just not fair!” Well, it is not, and when we see how this affects us, it’s not fair for us either.

Let’s be clear about what Jesus is asking this man. According to this week’s Sermon Brainwave Podcast, Jesus is indeed critiquing how meaningful his wealth is to him. We cannot separate ourselves from that critique. More often than not, our treasures get in the way of seeing the bigger picture of life, but there is much more. What may be more important to this man than his wealth is the status that goes with the wealth. Jesus is also calling him to set aside his status alongside his wealth. In that age, that status meant absolutely everything, for it set the bar on who he was in the world. He was essentially called to give up all that he was. It was more important to him than the Gospel of life, which requires we be willing to set everything aside for the love of God and the love of neighbor. It’s not fair because we have become entrenched when God is calling us forward.

It’s something we have to really look at when we talk about giving up parts of who we are. It’s hard, but life has its phases of forcing us out of one identity and into another. Some can be joyful; some can be sorrowful. Giving up carefree childhood and taking on adult responsibilities. Giving up singleness and moving into marriage. Giving up relative freedom to become a parent. Giving up school and moving into the working world. Letting go of a child moving away, from leaving school to leaving the near vicinity. All of these can be joyful, but they also have a sorrowful edge to them. I mean, if nothing else, look at the saga of Brett Favre. He just couldn’t give up that identity as a football player; that saga went on for about a decade, and it grew tiresome when he avoided just accepting what life requires. Retirement is a big one. We have to give up our identity as that worker and everything that goes with it. It can be a big relief, or it can be depressing. It’s also our

abilities. When we age, we don't necessarily have the ability to do and to go as we did before, and that means we give up something special.

This is a time for challenge. We can't just be however we want to be when the calling of God moves us to a new place. We as the famous love chapter says, "when I was a child, I reasoned like a child..." We need to often shed our old skin to put on newness and new possibilities. It's not easy, as this young rich man had to realize in his case. It's the same with each of us, and we have to go there, whether we want to or not. God calls us individually and communally to new phases, new growth at every age. It's a place where there is challenge, but once we take on the new life in every phase of living, we find that there is goodness awaiting us because God is always awaiting us around every bend.

On the other hand, we have Job, who lost everything: family, land, crops...all were destroyed. He sits in despair, seeking God but realizing that God cannot be found right now. God is so very far away, and his so-called friends are sitting with him and trying to help him in his grief. They are telling him he needs to do this and that, and Job is sitting among the shambles of his life, seeking God, and crying out in his own way, "It's just not fair!" Job here is very right as well. His situation had difficulty thrust upon him. His life was taken away unfairly as the book makes clear, and he is left with nothing but memories and ashes. It's not fair because goodness can often be ripped away from us.

He doesn't get his answer from until the very end of the book, but Job's struggles are often our own. Job's friends are quick to point out their very popular theology of the day: when something goes wrong, you deserve it. The scales always tip the right way and everyone gets what they deserve in this life. There's only one problem with this assessment: it's totally wrong. They respond with challenge, when Job needs comfort.

Even God says at the end of this book that it's not always the way it works; the good don't always get goodness, and the wrongdoers aren't always repaid in due this life. As Jesus says later in the Gospels, "the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous."

We don't necessarily get what we deserve; sometimes that's a pain and sometimes it's not. We praise God because God is the God of Grace that doesn't persecute us for our wrongdoings. That is a joy. On the other hand, when there is wrongdoing in our world, we have a system that calls for justice, but justice isn't always done. Those who do wrong don't always get convicted, and sometimes convicted felons are innocent. This is just downright horrible, and it requires we be sad, angry, mournful, and whatever other emotions come. It is not a time for personal challenge but a time for whatever emotions to realize that, yeah, things aren't always fair, and it's, well, not fair.

This is a time when there must be comfort. I have a friend who just became a doctor who naturally finds herself in some difficult situations, naturally so. She asked me recently what one can possibly say to those who are dying. I know, absolutely easy question. There are a lot of ways to take it. We can say easy platitudes like the friends of Job or we can preach, but that does no good. In the final analysis, it doesn't matter what we say. We can say platitudes upon platitudes, but what people really want in the most trying times of life is the presence of someone who cares. The thing that probably makes the most sense is "I'm here with you." It's the same way for those who have experienced a death or a major loss of any kind. It isn't necessarily helpful to pull out the spirit of Job's friends, trying to teach him theology at his worst point. We don't need "Well, God needed another angel in heaven" or an easy saying of "God won't give you more than you can handle." It's a dismissal of the true and honest kind of "It's just not fair." We need the presence of a friend

who will just sit with us in the difficulty, who will be the tangible sign of an intangible Holy Spirit, who we may or may not feel in the moments of the worst difficulty. In these moments, there is a lot that is unfair. One cannot do anything to prevent death, and the dying doesn't necessarily have their loved ones around. There is nothing that can be said in such a difficult but holy moment, so we just...be. We be the tangible presence of Jesus Christ in our love and our understanding. We don't try to do, because there is nothing to be done. There is just the unfairness of the world that has us locked into difficult feelings.

The bottom line is this, the point of Christianity on the whole to find the Gospel: we challenge the comfortable and comfort the challenged. The main point is finding the difference. When we think we have it all figured out, when we think that we are doing well in the Christian life and everyone needs to follow our example, we are a little too comforted. When we think that we can't do anything right or that God is out to smite us, it is time to hear a message of comfort. When the little things seem to be bigger than anything else, it is time for challenge to see the bigger issues. When we are feeling so challenged because the world is out of control and we can't do anything about it, it's time to look back and see where we can be effective. When we think that we are Job when everything is really is OK, it's time for challenge. When everything around us truly is falling apart, it's time for comfort. When we think that everyone must be where we are, then it's time for challenge. One message is not good without the other, for Christianity either turns into a punitive to-do list of rules or a fluffy "everything is OK" mentality in a world that truly needs work. It's just that easy; it's just that hard.

Life is full of those "It's just not fair" moments all over the place. Sometimes we have been truly wronged; sometimes we find what God asks of us to be seemingly more than we

canbear. It's important that we know the difference between the times we are called to challenge and to comfort, for the lines often become blurred more than they should be. Following God requires sacrifice, the willingness to pick up the cross and to go with it daily. Following God also means that we be the comfort to the afflicted in times of deep pain. It's not about what we say but what we do in those times. We want to sit with Job in his despair, not preach to him about what he needs to do. All because, well, "It's just not fair." This world is not fair, and we need to know how to respond to the unfairness in order to faithfully follow Jesus in challenge or in comfort, and knowing the right time to do each. For this comfort and this challenge, thanks be to God! Amen and amen.