Sermon – 3-31-19 – St. Mark’s, Glen Ellyn

“That’s not fair!”
At least once a week, in my practice as a child psychologist, this unhappy protest bounces loudly off the walls of my office. “That’s not fair!” – what my colleagues and I have come to call the Battle Cry of the Siblings. Those of us who grew up with brothers and sisters, or those of us who raised siblings, or for that matter, those of us who have ever interacted with other human beings (I hope that includes most of us!) – have had that feeling rise up inside of us – our sense of fairness has been violated, our rules about what is equal have been broken, we didn’t get what we deserved and we’re not happy!

“That’s not fair”

And today we hear it in the Gospel of Luke, in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Prodigal means wasteful, reckless with money. The story begins with a man who has two sons. The younger son asks his father for his portion of the family estate as an early inheritance. Once received, the son promptly sets off on a long journey to a distant land and begins to waste his fortune on wild living.

When the money runs out, a severe famine hits the country and the son finds himself in dire circumstances. He takes a job feeding pigs. Eventually, he grows so destitute that he even longs to eat the food for the pigs.

The young man finally comes to his senses, remembering his home and father. In humility, he decides to return to his father and ask for forgiveness and mercy. The father who has been watching and waiting, receives his son back with open arms of compassion. He is overjoyed by the return of his lost son.

Immediately the father turns to his servants and asks them to prepare an enormous feast to celebrate this happy reunion. Meanwhile, the older son is furious when he comes in from working the fields to discover the party. Even though his father tried to reassure him of his love by saying, "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.", you can just hear the thoughts, can’t you?.... It’s not fair!

In the eyes of the elder son, the non-prodigal son, who has been obedient and hard-working, his father’s preferential treatment to his irresponsible, opportunistic, undeserving younger brother leaves him feeling taken for granted. And to add insult to injury, when the no-good comes home, dad throws a big party for him – and doesn’t even invite the elder son to come in from the field where he is working – to join the celebration. The elder son is so angry that he won’t even enter the house, and when his father comes outside to plead with him to join the celebration, he does not address his father as "Father" and speaks to him about "this son of yours" instead of "my brother."
In his mind, the celebration of his brother’s return is a rejection of himself – his work ethic and sense of family loyalty. His father's response to the younger son has violated the elder brother’s rules about fairness and it is a set of rules that many of us can relate to – an economic model where everything has to add up to zero; where the only way someone can get something is if it has been taken away from someone else. If his father takes his brother back it means he’s being pushed away; good behavior gets nothing, while bad behavior – prodigal behavior - gets rewarded.

And on top of it, the whole parable gets named after him! It’s not fair.

Since we’re talking about fairness, it wouldn’t be fitting to leave the Prodigal Son out of the equation. He’s no less concerned about getting his share – in fact, he doesn’t seem to be above manipulating his father to get what he thinks he deserves. His tactics may be different but his commitment to the economic model is no less strong.

How many of us operate with a similar economic model? How many times have we said to ourselves, the only way I’ll get what I want is if I get it before someone else does? Or that person’s success comes at the cost of my failure? The zero-sum game, an economic model of scarcity; that assumes a limit on valuable resources. From an early age we are taught how to succeed, the importance of winning: The early bird gets the worm, You get what you pay for, No pain no gain. If you’re drawing straws with your brother to see who goes first, someone has to get the short end of the stick.

And depending on the day, we’re likely to identify with one or the other of the brothers in today’s parable. Which brother is it for you today? Are you feeling lucky that you managed to win the latest negotiation with your spouse or in your work life?...did you out-argue someone or out-maneuver them in getting your way? Or are you the one who got bested?...and you want to take the moral high ground because you feel manipulated? Are you gloating because you won or protesting because you lost?

Because in the economic system of the sons, someone has to win and someone has to lose, right?

Maybe for our answer, we should look to the father in Jesus’ parable, who recognizes that both of his sons are in a “distant land”, far from home – a land of lost connections, of broken relationships. The father, who stands in an open doorway, waiting for his lost son to return, who doesn’t need words of apology or requests for forgiveness, but instead runs to his son and wrapped him in his arms. And who turns to his elder son, who in his anger and hard-heartedness, is equally lost and no less far away, and pleads with him to recognize the love that is there. For the father, there’s no zero-sum game economic model. For him, there’s enough of love and forgiveness for both of his beloved children.

And one of the messages of this Gospel is that, with God, there’s no zero-sum-game economy. For God, there is no limit on love and forgiveness of us, his beloved children.

The Good News of today’s Gospel is that God’s is, instead, an economy of Grace.
Grace...
Which can’t be calculated, which is not about who is first or last, which is not about counting or measuring. We receive grace as a gift from God, not as something that we work to earn, or for that matter, not something that we even deserve. Lucky us, our God of mercy keeps showing us the economy of grace, where fairness doesn’t figure in.

God stands in the doorway of his house, waiting for us to return from our “distant lands”, of our worst behavior, our biggest sins, of the most horrible ways we treat each other. God, in his grace, looks longingly out from the doorway, searching for us so that he can begin the celebration of our return.

No matter what, we are God’s own. If we have strayed, if we have done wrong, if we think we have sinned way beyond redemption, God will take us back. If we have been the prodigal son, God will be there, to put his arms around us, go fetch the best robe, and celebrate our return. If we’ve been the elder son, in our anger and resentment, stuck in the “distant land” of our idea of what is fair, God waits for us, eager to bring us home. We may get lost, but God will be there, joyful when we’re found, to invite us back, to take our place at his table.

As Henri Nouwen said, in his book, The Return of the Prodigal Son, “God rejoices. Not because the problems of the world have been solved, not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end, nor because thousands of people have been converted and are now praising him for his goodness. No, God rejoices because one of his children who was lost has been found”

Grace...there is nothing that we can do to make God love us more, and there is nothing that we can do to make God love us less.
Is it fair?
Nope.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.