

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 14, 2010

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“No Fair ”

Scriptures:

Psalm 32

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32



If I had a nickel for every injustice voiced by our children throughout 20 years of childrearing, well, I'd have a lot of nickels.

“How come *she* gets to sit in front?”

“How come *he* gets to stay up?”

“Why can't the cat sleep with *me*?”

“Why does *she* get to go?”

“How come he always gets to do whatever he wants?!”

And no matter what the response, no matter what the reason, the answer was always “NO FAIR!” “NO FAIR!”

Now, I think most of us can admit that those two words coming from a child and directed at our adult decisions do make us pause. Most of us most of the time want to be thought of as parents who treat our children equally. Because, truly, we love them all the same. We try really hard not to give unfair advantage to one gender over another, or to the older one over the younger one, even the healthy one may get a popsicle, too, when the sick one has a sore throat, so those words “NO FAIR” strike at our hearts as harsh accusation.

What we don't read in our scripture this morning is that the custom during the time of the parable of the prodigal son was to give to the first-born two thirds of the estate, with the rest being divided up among all the remaining children. No fair. Enough of an injustice in the mind of a younger brother, perhaps, to seek other alternatives.

We also do not read about the sacred attitude of the Jewish community at that time toward land ownership. These were ancestral lands given to God's chosen people by God. So when your neighbor lets his kid sell off a chunk of the promised land and take the money and leave town, the community is hurt and angry. No fair.

It is also helpful to realize that the younger son's request to his father for an early distribution of his inheritance, before his father's death, was extremely offensive. Rev. Kate Huey recalls the story of the members of the news media bringing up to Prince Charles the prospect of his ascending to the throne of England, when he stopped the conversation cold by saying: “Gentlemen, you are speaking of the death of my mother.” Worse than no fair, no clue.

So the younger son takes off and spends all his money and we may wonder this morning

if things would have been different for him if there had been no famine. Because famines are not fair. But we don't have a lot of sympathy for this young man because he squandered everything he had. He didn't think much about tomorrow or the possibility of famine. He was definitely in immediate gratification mode.

And it doesn't seem to take long before he hits bottom. Far away from home, starving, feeding pigs, the very animals held by his home community as unclean. He could sink no lower. Then we read, "He came to himself."

He came to himself. He remembered who he was, where he came from, who he once belonged to, and he decided to go home. "I will get up and go to my father."

Now we may be *really* looking at "no fair." Some scholars accuse him of calculated self-interest, not true repentance: a master manipulator who biblical scholar Richard Swanson suspects knows how "to play the old man like a fiddle."

All he does is show up again and he gets a new robe, a ring, new sandals and a huge party, and this time it's his older brother who cries, "No fair!"

And many, many times, so do we. There is no justice, no fairness in most of the calamities which befall us: natural disasters of every type, diseases with no known causes, aggressive cancer cells, accidents, tumbling economies and crumbling savings, layoffs. Children born into poverty, into abusive homes, into poor educational systems or none at all—none of that is fair. Or civilians caught in the ravages of war—that's really not fair. And from our position of having tried to do everything right—work hard, attend good schools, pay for our cable TV, pay our taxes, we, too, cry "No fair". How come they get first priority for the job? How come *they* get the scholarships? How come *they* get to speak *their* language? Why do we have to make special provisions for *them*?

When we read the parable of the Prodigal Son, they say each one of us can usually identify at some level with one of the characters in the story: and many, many times it's the older brother, whether we're first-born in our families or not. We consider ourselves the hard workers, the ones who play by the rules, the ones who do everything right, and along comes so-and-so who just seems to walk in and get it handed to them.

Enter Jesus. Enter Jesus and leave it to him to lift up our thinking, and that of the grumbling Pharisees and scribes, to lift it up out of the scorekeeping, petty counting, comparing and despairing world view which never fails to keep us in an unending loop of resentment. Enter Jesus with his description of a father who loves his son so much and is so grateful for his return, no matter what he did, that he breaks with all the expected behaviors and customs of a patriarch of his day and runs out to greet him. Runs to him, puts his arms around him and kisses him. And celebrates!

And when his oldest son sits outside refusing to go in to the party, mumbling "No fair," how come he gets a fatted calf and I don't even get a goat, his father again breaks with his expected role of remote patriarch and, risking the shame of leaving his guests inside, comes out to

his son. And we read he pleads with him. “No fair” doesn’t sit any better with this parent than it does with us. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Just like the shepherd who left his 99 sheep to go after the lost one and rejoices, just like the woman who turns her house upside down to find her lost coin and calls all her friends together to rejoice with her, Jesus adds on this third parable in this same Chapter 15 in Luke’s gospel to demonstrate how God rejoices when just one of God’s children turns around and asks for mercy, when someone who once was lost now is found.

And, apparently, God’s love is not fair either. If God’s love was fair, we’d get only what we deserve, and given that we all fall into that sinner category, I don’t think we’d be going to many parties. Like the prodigal son when “he came to himself”, it’s coming to ourselves that makes God rejoice: realizing who and whose we are, where we came from, where we belong and where we want to return. Realizing that we are God’s children who suffer from self-righteousness, bad decisions and bad choices, reckless spending, judgmentalism, exclusionary behavior and scorekeeping. We come to ourselves and realize we are God’s children who need only to look up from the bottom and say, “I will get up and go to my Father and I will say to him, Father I have sinned against you.” Then hang on to your party hats, because our heavenly parent has been waiting, waiting for the lost ones, waiting for the ones who really blew it, waiting even for the ones who thought they had it all together, just waiting to catch a glimpse of us from afar on our way back so God can run to us and put divine arms around us and give us a holy kiss. To welcome us back and throw a huge party. No fair? Maybe ... but the love is all the same. Just think of all the nickels that God must have. Amen.

