

If you grew up in a family with more than one child, as I did, you are undoubtedly familiar with the expression “It’s not fair!” Today’s readings seem to take us to a place where unfair treatment seems to be the order of the day. There’s more to it than meets the eye though, as the first reading explains – God’s ways simply aren’t ours. Let’s take a closer look together.

One morning, in the days before social distancing, I joined a couple of friends for coffee and a general-purpose gripe session. The discussion in play when I arrived was how unfair life could be. My friend Joe was complaining that he couldn’t get a promotion until and unless a woman from a minority group got one, too. Fred didn’t like it that new hires were earning as much as it had taken him twelve years of hard work to get. How was that fair? The others, it emerged, had already contributed their tales of injustice. When I showed up they glowered at me as if all this was somehow my fault, or at least that of my unfair friend, God.

“Why is life unfair like that, O Holy One,” Joe asked, as the others murmured agreement.

“Show me your contract,” I offered, “and we’ll see if we can find your special treatment clause, Joe.”

The rest of the guys laughed, and the mood lightened up a bit. But then my friend Fred asked, “Seriously, Tim, why *is* it like that?” He remembered the gospel we just heard and quoted it as best he could as Exhibit A. The rest of the men murmured agreement, and I could see what was going to happen next, so I silently said a quick prayer and asked:

“What should it be like, Fred?”

Fred’s no dummy, so he anticipated where the conversation would go and said, “Cruelty and injustice are the common heritage of humans, Tim. Our egos pretty much guarantee that. But God? God is perfectly capable of doing better than us, so why *doesn’t* God do better than us?”

“Maybe God does, Fred, but we just don’t see it that way,” I suggested. “Sometimes something being good and something being the way we want it to be are two entirely different things.”

“Something like cancer’s never a good thing, Tim,” Fred observed, “nor is losing a child. That’s really not fair. Why does God allow things like that to happen?”

“I don’t run the universe, Fred,” I admitted, “but let me tell you a story and maybe you can discern God’s way in what happens. Even in a crucifixion you can sometimes hear the whispers of love if you listen in faith with the ears of your heart.”

“Tell us,” Fred said.

“A while ago, while I was the overnight chaplain at the hospital, I was called to the Obstetrics unit. When I got there, I was told that a young couple had just lost their baby, which was supposed to have been born within the next few days. The young lady would still have to go through the pain of labor and delivery, but she’d be doing so knowing the baby was dead.”

The guys all shook their heads and Joe asked “See – that’s what Fred meant. How is that fair? How could God let something like that happen?”

“What would you have done if you’d been me, Joe?” I asked.

“I think I would’ve been pretty sad and angry, Tim,” Joe said, and the others nodded.

“That’s indeed how most folks react, Joe,” I said gently, “but I didn’t ask you how you would’ve felt. I asked what you would’ve done.”

It got pretty quiet. Then I said, “Maybe you would’ve done what I did, Joe. Prayed that in the moment God would do what God does best, turned it completely over to God, and then gone in to see the young parents. That’s what I did.”

“They were there together on the bed, hugging while both sets of their parents sat across from them. In the next hour or so, I pretty much watched as God showered them with God’s love. If someone named ‘Tim’ was there, it was only as God’s instrument. Yes, I told them, this was very sad, quite similar to my wife’s and my own experiences, certainly not their fault and definitely not a punishment of any kind. In that very moment, many other couples around the world were going through exactly the same thing as they were, because at this point in the story of Creation, that’s how things can turn out.”

“But they did know their child and their child knew them. We recalled together how we’d all watched little knees or elbows glide across mom’s tummy, and how amazing it is that babies

can already recognize their parents' voices when they're born. Yes, there had indeed been a bond of love. Their little girl had given them all she could in her brief visit here, and they had cared for her as best they could. I related Paula D'Arcy's wonderful story *The Gift of the Red Bird*, and how she had learned in her own sadness that all of life is a gift. Everything's precious. There are no special treatment clauses. It's all a love story, even the parts that are bitterly hard to accept."

"There were plenty of tears in that hour-and-a-half, some laughter if you can imagine that, and hugs among us all. I assured them that they'd be able to hold their little baby, if they wished, in one of the soft, tiny blankets the lovely ladies here at St. Ann's knit for such times. As I left, I told them they'd more than likely eventually meet another couple just like them. In your helping them in that moment, I explained, the love between God, you and your little baby girl will blossom into a profound blessing that could not have come to be otherwise. This is a big mystery, but it's also deeply true, as sad as it can be for us."

"A week or so later I got a call from the parents asking if I could join them for a memorial ceremony and of course, I went. When I got there, the first thing the dad said to me was 'You have no way of knowing this, but what you said to us then was exactly what we needed to hear.' Of course, *I* hadn't told them a thing. They had heard the whisper of love, from God, through me, directly to their hearts. And like the laborers in the vineyard, Joe, nobody receives more love, and nobody gets less, no matter what their experience has been – good, bad, fair or unfair. It's like the Eucharist – nobody receives *more* Jesus than anyone else. Each of us approaches the altar with our own story, with its own mix of what's happy and what's sad, what has been easy to accept and what seems so blatantly unfair. And in Jesus, everyone receives exactly what they need."

"Life may not be fair in your eyes," I said to my friends, "but as you think that, be mindful that we're all equal in the eyes of God, and always remember to look for the love."