

## Ordinary 25A - 2020

A few years ago, Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal, two zoologists at Emory University, decided to study the evolution of fairness. They wanted to explore where our distaste for unfairness comes from. Is it a cultural add-on, or is it hardwired?

To study this question, Brosnan and de Waal designed an experiment using capuchin monkeys. Pairs of monkeys were placed in adjacent cages where they could see each other, and trained to take turns giving small granite rocks to their human handler. Each time a monkey relinquished a rock, she would receive a piece of cucumber as a reward.

Capuchins love cucumbers, so both monkeys found this arrangement satisfactory, and handed over their rocks with enthusiasm. But then, the handler changed things up. After a few fair and even exchanges, the handler rewarded the first monkey with a chunk of cucumber as usual, but gave the second monkey a grape — the equivalent of fine wine or caviar in the monkey world.

Seeing that the game had changed for the better, the first monkey perked up, and very eagerly handed over another rock, expecting, of course, to receive a grape, too. But no — the handler gave her another piece of cucumber. To make things worse, the handler then gave the second monkey another grape for free!

The results — which you can look up on YouTube — were striking. The first monkey just about lost her mind. Not only did she refuse to eat the cucumber; she hurled it at the handler's face. She then proceeded to bang against the bars of the cage, throw her remaining rocks in every direction, and make furious gestures at her grape-eating companion.

The experiment has since been repeated using other primates, and the results have been astonishingly similar. Scientists have also studied the development of fairness in human babies, and found that infants as young as nine months old will react quite strongly and negatively to perceived unfairness. Clearly, as Brosnan and De Waal concluded after their experiment, fairness is a concept that is deeply rooted in the human psyche.

Which brings us to this week's lectionary, which features a story about fairness that might very well lead us to behave like that first capuchin monkey, and throw a few cucumbers at God. Why? Because the story turns our hardwired assumptions on their heads, and challenge us to consider tough questions about fairness, justice, and equality that we'd rather ignore.

In his 1993 book, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, Frederick Buechner offers this advice about reading Scripture: "Don't start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives. Start by listening for the questions it asks." When you hear the question that is your question, you have begun your journey.

But God — if the landowner in Jesus's parable represents God — is not fair. At least, not according to our inherited beliefs about fairness. God, it turns out, does not believe that the best place to be is at the front of the line. God isn't interested, as we so often are, in showing favor to the best, the biggest, and the brightest — the workers with the most elite educations, astonishing professional achievements, and fanciest zip codes.

In fact, the landowner in Jesus's story doesn't judge his workers by their hours. He doesn't obsess over why some workers are able to start at dawn and others are not. Perhaps the late starters aren't as literate, educated, or skilled as their competitors. Perhaps they have learning challenges, or a tough home life, or children to care for at home. Perhaps they're refugees, or don't own cars, or don't speak the language, or can't get green cards. Perhaps they struggle with chronic depression or anxiety. Perhaps they've hit a glass ceiling after years of effort, and they're stuck. Perhaps employers refuse to hire them because they're gay, or trans, or disabled, or black, or female.

Whatever the case may be, the landowner doesn't ask them to explain or defend themselves. All he cares about is that every last person in the marketplace finds a spot in his vineyard — the early bird and the latecomer, the able-bodied and the infirm, the young and the old, the popular and the forgotten. When the workday is over, what concerns the landowner is not who deserves what. All he cares about is that every worker ends the day with the dignity and security of a living wage.

The capacity to go home and feed a family; Sufficient security and peace of mind to sleep well; A solid grasp on hope; A reliable sense of accomplishment, belonging, and dignity.

It embarrasses me to admit this, but I have always assumed, when hearing or reading this parable, that I would have been one of the early workers in the landowner's vineyard. *Of course* I'd be first in line and ready to go before the sun came up. *Of course* I'd work the hardest and the longest. I'm Type A!

But consider this: the parable reads very differently if you situate yourself at the end of the line. The workers who got more than they expected to — the ones who received twelve times the pay they knew they deserved — they were *ecstatic* at the end of their workday. Ecstatic, stunned, thrilled, and grateful. Their experience was one of utter blessing, and I'll bet that what went on at their end of the line was one big raucous party.

But all the other stuff? The envy? The bitterness? The grumbling? The dissatisfaction? All of that murky stuff belonged to the "deserving" folks at the front of the line. They couldn't party — they were too busy feeling miffed and offended. They couldn't take satisfaction in their hours of good work. They couldn't delight in the fruit of the vineyard. They couldn't relax into their time off and enjoy the gifts of leisure. Though the landowner honored his agreement with them, though they received their daily bread and lacked no good thing, they ended up wasting their off-hours in resentment and anger.

Like the monkey in Brosnan and de Waal's experiment, they took a perfectly good reward, and hurled it into the empty air, fists raised.

"Is your eye evil because I am good?" God asks. Maybe, if God's generosity offends us, it's because we don't have eyes to see where we actually stand in the line of God's grace and kindness. Where would we rather stand in the end? At the front of the line, where bitterness and judgment reign? Or at the back, where joy has won the day?

I don't think it's a coincidence that the landowner insists on paying his workers in reverse order, thereby making sure that the first workers see what the last receive. He wants them to experience what radical generosity looks like. He wants them to relinquish their anger and join the party. He wants them to use their plenty to build longer tables, not higher walls. (Ideas from *Debie Thomas*: [debie.thomas1@gmail.com](mailto:debie.thomas1@gmail.com))

A preacher told of a conversation with a mother who understood some of the graciousness that is exemplified in today's parable. She had raised a large number of children on her own. How did she do it? What guidelines could she offer to others in similar circumstances? She was asked, "I suppose you loved all of your children equally, making sure that you gave all of them exactly the same treatment?" The wise mother replied: "I loved all of them, loved them greatly, but I never wanted to love them equally. I loved the one who was down until he got up. I loved the one who was weak until she was strong. I loved the one that was hurt until he was healed. I loved the one who was lost until she was found." It seems to me that grace meets each person's need; not their deserts.

Thomas Halik, a Czech writer, suggests that one of the reasons why so many people in the world reject the churches is that they see us as "embittered moralizers," older brothers of the prodigal son, doing our religious and moral duties, but bitterly, and criticizing those who don't live like us out of hidden envy. Nietzsche made a similar accusation more than a hundred years ago.

Sadly, there's more than a little truth in that accusation. Too often, we are embittered moralizers, secretly envying the amoral and criticizing our world out of bitterness. But that's an occupational hazard for the good and the faithful. Peter and first apostles struggled with it.

Why should we be immune?

We needn't be immune, but we do need to be honest in admitting that, despite our real goodness and fidelity, this indicates that we are still far from being full saints. (Fr. Ron Rolheiser)