

**Homily – Weekend of October 1st, 2023
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Here is a story to get us started. ***It is about this Jewish woman raised in the liberal leftist tradition who was part of a socialist movement in her youth. She wasn't a practicing Jew; in fact, she was more an atheist. Well, one day she takes her grandson to the beach. He is her favorite. She buys him a little yellow sun hat, a swimsuit, a sand pail, and shovel. As he plays in the sand, she falls asleep in her beach chair. The little boy wanders out into the surf and***



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Atheist or not, she starts screaming to high heaven, "Please, God, save my child! Creator of the Universe, blest be Thou, I promise that if you save my grandchild, like Abraham, I will go to the synagogue every Saturday. I will eat only Kosher food. I'll do anything! Just save my grandchild." Sure enough, the child is tossed safely up on the shore. She runs down, bends over the child and sees that he is breathing. Then she frowns, and pointing a finger up to heaven she demands, "He had a hat!"

That story is a bit of an exaggeration, but we often need the exaggerated version in someone else's life in order to get in touch with the less exaggerated version in our own life. We can have 99 things go right in the course of our day and never think to let a prayer of thanksgiving escape our lips. Or, maybe worse, we convince ourselves that we are entitled to these good things because we are so good, and so hard working, and so Christian. But let one bad thing happen, and we are quickly shouting, "He had a hat!" or "Unfair!"

I mentioned in last weekend's homily that whenever I hear the parable about the workers in the vineyard, and how those who worked only one hour get paid the same amount as those who had worked the entire day, I inwardly want to yell, "Unfair!" Well, guess what? We are back in the vineyard again, and this time Jesus

tells me that the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of me. Again, I want to yell, “Unfair!” Why am I trying so hard around this place? Maybe I should have lunch with some Revenue Canada agents or don some fishnet stocking and hang out on the street corner and ask these people what they’re doing so right and what I’m doing so wrong.

Ezekiel, in that first reading, is also dealing with a group of people who are raising their fists at God and saying, “Unfair! ***The way of the Lord is unfair!***” In Ezekiel’s time, the 6th century B.C., the Jewish people would have thought this way. They felt that the sins of the fathers (I suppose mothers, too) would be visited upon the children for three or four generations. If your father was a scoundrel, don’t expect to have any luck in life. Don’t expect God’s blessing for at least three or four generations down the road. Now, I do believe that consequences of one’s actions can extend beyond a person’s lifetime and impact future generations. If we continue to pollute the earth, it will have a negative impact for future generations. However, I don’t believe it is God punishing us; it’s more the pain we inflict on ourselves.

It also was believed to work the other way. These same Jewish people believed that if you lived an honorable life, future generations would also benefit. I think there’s some truth in that too, as I have always said good children seemingly have a potential head start in life simply because they had good parents. However, the Jews in Ezekiel’s time didn’t feel they had to be good as long as they could point back to someone in their family tree who was good. They cried “Unfair” if something bad happened to them. This was not supposed to happen, because their grandfather had found favor with God, so the favor should also be theirs. It would be like us saying, “I don’t have to pray to God, because my mother prayed the rosary faithfully every day, and that’s good enough for me.” Or, “The pope is holy, so I don’t have to heed the call to grow in holiness myself.”

But, here's the problem that Ezekiel sees. He doesn’t believe we can ride on the coattails, on the virtues, of someone who came before us. Nor does he think we should be punished for three or four generations because of the sins of a previous generation. Ezekiel puts personal responsibility back on the person themselves. Our tendency may be to abdicate our responsibility by saying, “Unfair! I didn’t have good parents, or teachers, or priests, or politicians, therefore they are to be blamed for my present difficulties.” Ezekiel doesn’t buy that for one moment. For Ezekiel,

the past doesn't have to dictate the future. You are not defined by your past nor by your family tree.

The Gospel of Matthew starts off with Jesus' family tree, and there are more horse thieves in that tree than you can shake a stick at. If you ever feel down about the gene pool you emerged from, just read the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, and you'll automatically feel better about yourself. You'll even find yourself saying, "And Jesus, the Messiah, came from that bunch!"

Ezekiel tells us that God's ways are fair, more than fair. If a righteous person commits a sin, it's on that person to make it right. God delights in conversion not punishment to the fourth generation. And if a wicked person, Ezekiel tells us, does what is lawful and right, God will give that person abundant life. We're not limited by our past or by what our parents did or didn't do. We are sovereignly free to choose good or bad. When we choose the good, we are putting on the mind of Christ, as St. Paul told us in that second reading. When we do not choose the mind of Christ, we sin, but we are not loved any less.

In the gospel, the two sons mentioned are the two dimensions of every person who has ever lived. One son says that he will *not* work in his father's vineyard, but has a change of heart, and eventually does so. The other son promises to work, but never shows up. Interestingly, the ideal situation is not mentioned. The ideal would be a son who says, "yes" to working in his father's vineyard and always shows up to do so. This third son, this ideal, is not mentioned because none of us has been that person. That ideal is the description of someone who has it all together, and let's face it, none of us has it all together. Thank goodness none of us is measured by the good we do but by the grace we accept. I suppose the son who initially said "no" but eventually does the work, is praised by Jesus because he allowed conversion to happen within him. He allowed the Spirit to soften the edges of his answer so that, in time, his final answer "no" was not his final answer.

This is Matthew's Gospel, as you know. The gospel writer Luke also has a version of this story; we call it the story of the Prodigal Son. It's also about two sons. As you remember, in that story the younger son says a clear "no" to living with his father. In time, he has his own conversion experience and comes home to work on his father's farm. The older son, who has always said "yes" to his father and has always

followed the rules, in the end cannot enter the house of his father; he doesn't work in his father's vineyard. ***Which of the two did his father's will?***

God gives us lots of room to do the good we all intended to do but never got around to it. God is patient with our yes's and our no's, our faithfulness and our fickleness, our "state of grace" and all the ways we cling to our sins.

The late Brennan Manning says this in one of his books: "The hookers and swindlers enter (the kingdom of God) before us because they know they cannot save themselves, that they cannot make themselves presentable or lovable. They risk everything on Jesus and, knowing they didn't have it all together, were not too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace."

It is as if God is saying, "I dare you to trust that I love you just as you are and not as you should be, because you're never going to be as you should be, and that's more than all right with me."

Fr. Phil