

Pentecost 20, 2008  
Good Hope Lutheran Church  
Ezekiel 18

We turn our attention once more to the Old Testament lesson, found this week in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 18. In Ezekiel 18, the people turn to God with what I think will strike us as a very familiar complaint. “O Lord God,” they said. “It’s just not fair.”

The Lord be with you. And let us pray:

Heavenly Father, life happens, and sometimes we rejoice and sometimes we must weep. Seldom do we really understand what’s going on. But always we trust in you. Be there for us every single day, to comfort and sustain, to guide and protect. Carry us through the ups and downs of this world o Lord and then—on the last day, because you love us—carry us home to heaven as well. All this we pray in the name of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, AMEN.

Today’s subject is difficult, and maybe painful, and very important too. It is always difficult and painful and important to talk about “the unfairness of life,” so to speak—more so now than ever, I’m afraid, because so many of our families are dealing with so many burdens. We’ve had hospitalizations, we’ve had accidents. I announced in the prayers last week a suicide in the extended family of one of our older members. Awful things in life happen, there are stories here to tell and hugs to be given out. For now, let me skip any sort of formal introduction to this sermon, and kinda get right down to the point. It’s a question people have had, a cry they’ve lifted up to God throughout all history. We see it in Ezekiel 18, and we hear it now in our own lives. “O Lord God. Why. Why has this thing happened, whatever it is, o Lord God—it’s just not fair.”

A few thoughts this morning, about fairness.

#1. “Life is not fair.” Ok, I feel that too. But sometimes it seems to me, the problem is really just the opposite. Sometimes it seems to me life is extraordinarily fair. Life is painfully fair. Sometimes the problem is not that life is UNfair, sometimes the problem is, life is only fair.

You forget to study for a test in school. Guess what, you’re going to get an F. You smoke three packs of cigarettes a day, starting in your teen age years, you know what? You’ll develop emphysema, or worse, by the time you reach your later years. You don’t drink, and you certainly don’t drink and drive, and you haven’t for 30 years! But one night, rather unexpectedly, you have

a couple of drinks, then try to make it home. Sure enough, there's a wreck, and a hefty ticket from the officer, and it's not fair! 30 solid years, then one minor slip up! Not fair! Well, maybe. See, you weren't taught "Don't drink and drive *often*," you were taught "Don't drink and drive at all, because this is what can happen when you do." We might want to argue that a clean driving record for 30 years ought to count for something, but "life" doesn't have to listen. "Life" said don't drink and drive at all, and you did, and this is what happens. It's not UNfair really, to be honest. Rather, it's merely fair. It's exactly fair. It's only fair.

Life in other words does not have to offer you forgiveness. Life does not have to offer you a second chance. Life does not understand the meaning of the word grace, or mercy, or redemption. But God does. God does, God goes beyond fair, to love, and mercy. I'll come back to that.

Move on quickly to #2. Sometimes as I said the problem is that life is *only* fair; but sometimes the problem is that life really is unfair, or so it would seem to us. The drunk walks away from the accident, while the driver of the other car is critically injured. The guy who abused his body in various ways over the years is healthy as a horse, while the other guy who's been a Boy Scout all *his* life gets the tragic diagnosis. The faithful employee gets the ax at work, while the lazy shiftless boss' son gets the promotion. And so on—there are many many moments in life like this, moments that truly strike us as unfair. Cause they are. And I don't know why they happen. I don't know why they happen, and even if I did—would it help? Not very much, I'm afraid.

Now I point out briefly that other unfair things happen, that we never seem to notice. For instance, because we were smart enough to be born in the United States, we've never been hungry a day in our lives. Others, born in other nations and at other times in history, have never been full. We here can get professional medical treatment every time we get a hang nail; do you know how many children around this world will die today from diseases we consider preventable? That's not fair either—we don't usually notice that.

Still, even in this land of plenty, plenty of things happen to all of us that are painful, and really

and truly unfair. Life it seems is a game, whose rules we really don't understand.

But here's the thing. Life really is not fair, ok, fine. But neither is God. Neither is God, tell me, was it fair that Jesus Christ died on a cross when you're the one who's guilty of the sin? You're the one who ran up the tab—He's the one who paid the bill, He died in your place!—is that fair? After all the Sunday mornings we've stood here, confessing the same old sins we keep committing time after time—is it fair to still expect God to forgive us? For God to love us, to care for us and provide for us, to welcome us home each time as His long lost children—is that fair? Umm, not exactly, no—but it's the truth. It's the Gospel, He does—it is the love of God, made known to us in Jesus Christ who died and rose again. We often find ourselves complaining about life's unfairness, well me too I can assure you—but it pays to remember, we are saved, because of a God who isn't exactly fair either. A God who is loving, and kind, and compassionate. A God, who died in our place.

Put it another way. I said earlier, life doesn't know the meaning of the word grace, or mercy. But God most certainly does. And He chooses to have both, for you. God knows how to play fair with us, He created justice after all, God knows how to be fair but He chooses to be gracious and merciful instead—and He calls us to do likewise, to love all others even if we don't happen to think they deserve it at the time. And He promises to be with us every moment of every day—when fair things happen, when unfair things happen. When we rejoice, when we weep—He promises to be with us, to help and to guide, till the day dawns at last when there is no more weeping, only joy. And the unfairness of this world of time finally gives way, to the greater and more glorious unfairness, of life in His presence forever. May that day come quickly, and may we be sustained in faith till it does. In the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.