

In our faith tradition, there are four virtues that we identify as ‘cardinal virtues’—cardinal meaning virtues from which other virtues come: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Today’s Gospel challenges our idea of justice. Culturally speaking, justice means that someone gets what he/she deserves. If you’re bad, you deserve bad; if you’re good, you deserve good.

Jesus was responding to some people, identified as Pharisees and scribes, who were complaining that he passed time with sinners. He decided to make a point to them by telling a story: the story we know as the Prodigal Son. Jesus described the son’s irresponsibility and selfishness in choosing to leave and putting his family’s financial well-being at risk: all so that he could leave the family who loved him and satisfy his wanderlust. Like any of us hearing a story, Jesus’ listeners would have seen this son to be sinful and foolish.

Jesus then described how the son eventually fell into a desperate situation, having to work and eat with pigs. The listeners would have thought, “*Ok, that’s justice, he got what he deserves.*” They would also have understood the son’s regret and his desire to go back home: “*Father, I have sinned against you and no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me as a servant*”. They would have agreed that going back as a hired worker was appropriate. *That’s justice*, they would have thought.

But then Jesus flipped justice upside down: He described that when the son approached home, his father saw him in the distance and rushed out to embrace him. Before the son could even finish his rehearsed words of repentance, the father smothered him with kisses and affection, clothed him in sandals, a robe and a ring—all outward signs to everyone, that the son’s identity was restored.

But Jesus’ listeners would have shifted their focus from the foolish younger son, to the father’s foolish response. He wasn’t following the protocols of justice. Justice would have been to wait until the hungry and weary son reached him, and to take a bowl of rotten vegetables and dump them on the ground at his feet. To say, “*Here’s what you deserve*”.

We’re likely not so different from Jesus’ listeners: we want virtue to be rewarded and sinners to be punished, whether it’s people in the news or the person driving erratically in morning traffic. But Jesus is giving us a deeper understanding of justice. He wants us to understand that God the father’s justice is something different. The word we use for his justice is *mercy*, and the definition I like for mercy is this: God gives us something better than we deserve.

And that’s what St. Paul emphasized in our second reading: “*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them...For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.*” In other words: God took on our sinful nature, so that we could unite ourselves to God’s divine nature. And as St. Paul says, we did nothing to deserve so great a gift and in fact, he ignored all our offenses.

And God’s brand of justice—mercy—can offend our sensibilities and maybe even scandalize us, as though God condones bad behavior. But the fact is, we’re all sinners. It’s only a matter of degree. At this Mass, you and I are the sinners dining with Jesus. *How’s that for justice?* And to be clear, God’s mercy does not mean that a society no longer has a judicial system or even prisons, that no one gets speeding tickets. Paying debts to society is not negated, even as God is merciful to those who seek His mercy.

*So why do we struggle with God’s justice, his mercy?* Perhaps because unlike the foolish son in the parable, we’ve never dealt with our past transgressions and made things right.

But God’s justice asks us to resist our tendency to write-off a person, to see them as less than a brother or sister. God’s justice asks us to pray even for His mercy for criminals, even as we pray for those they’ve harmed. God’s justice asks us to consider how much God loves that person, and it calls us to love them likewise.

And if God’s justice doesn’t resonate within, I encourage you to gaze into the visible manifestation of that mysterious justice and mercy. “*For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that (you) might become the righteousness of God in him.*” God’s justice, his mercy, is mounted to the wood of the cross, and you are the beneficiary.