

25th Sunday of the Year, A
Samuel Hakeem

Lectionary 133:

Isa 55:6-9
Ps 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18
Phil 1:20c-24, 27a
Matt 20:1-16a

Possible preaching themes

- Human beings naturally seek equity and fairness in matters of everyday life. However, God's total, free gift of self means that equity and fairness do not factor into the joys of our salvation.
- Empathy, the ability to recognize the "I" in another, can be helpful to evangelization. If "the first will be last and the last will be first," we ought to rejoice in the well-being and spiritual successes of others.

Possible scientific resources:

- **On equity and fairness:** In 2003 Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal conducted an experiment with capuchin monkeys which showed that the monkeys rejected a previously-accepted reward for completing a task after they witnessed another monkey receiving a better reward for completing the same task. Their experiment led to further questions regarding fairness and equity in non-human animals.
 - A video detailing the experiment: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKob6b8QzkU>
 - A New Yorker article detailing this experiment and others regarding fairness: <https://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/how-we-learn-fairness>
- **On empathy and valuation:** Traditional models of valuation can be modeled as "value for me" plus "value for you." There are models of valuation used by psychologists which accept a "mixed valuation" approach to human interaction, where value of self and value of other are linked together. This model suggests that my wellbeing depends to some degree on your wellbeing, underscoring the importance of empathy.
 - Detailed video by Dr. Michael Spezio on empathy and mixed valuation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmFLeEgMz3c> (See especially 52:46 onward)
 - Accessible article on the science of empathy <https://www.psu.edu/news/research/story/empathy-option-science-how-and-why-we-choose-be-empathetic/>

Preaching outline on the first theme:

- Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal work with capuchin monkeys in their research:

- Two monkeys were placed side by side in separate cages. The task: retrieve a rock from the corner of the cage, hand it to Sarah, and receive a reward.
 - During training, the reward was a cucumber: fine but not exciting for this species.
 - Once training was complete, the experiment began. As usual, one monkey retrieved the rock, handed it to Sarah and received a cucumber.
 - The monkey in the other cage completed the same task: retrieved the rock, handed it to Sarah, and received a grape, which this species loves.
 - The same task was completed, but the second monkey received a better reward, all in view of the first monkey.
 - The experiment was now repeated. The first monkey, which had previously received a cucumber, retrieved the rock, handed it to Sarah, and anticipated receiving her grape reward.
 - Sarah gave another cucumber, which it threw back at Sarah!
 - A better reward was available, and it was not about to settle for less.
 - Repeated trials showed a similar result.
- Monkeys, like humans, seem to have a sense of fairness.
 - How often we act the same:
 - I'm fine working for an agreed-upon wage, until I find out that someone is making much more for the same or lesser work.
 - This sense of fairness is a good thing
 - causing us to work for justice and equity, such as equal pay for women in the workplace.
 - When applied to others, we ensure equity extends beyond ourselves.
 - Yet today's parable seems to laugh in the face of equity.
 - Workers are hired; some work the entire day, others part, and still others only a few hours at most.
 - At close of day, the last to arrive are paid first, *in front of the whole group*.
 - Imagine the excitement building in those who worked the whole day as they witnessed the last to arrive receiving a full day's pay: "If they're getting a full day's pay...imagine what we will get!"
 - This problem would have disappeared had they been paid in reverse order, beginning with those who worked the whole day.
 - Excitement would build as each group received the full day's wages, expecting much less.
 - Those who worked the full day would never have known what the others were paid; all would be satisfied, many happy, a few ecstatic.
 - The order of the payout must be important. This parable is not simply about an equal reward, but in our rejoicing in an equal reward, even when others receive the same as us for much less effort!
 - How is this not unjust?
 - Remember it's a parable. We are not talking about money, but rather God's free gifts of salvation and love.
 - Some have been Christians since birth. Others came later. Still others have deathbed conversions.
 - There are no gradations to salvation; God's gift is given to each, fully, when each receives the gift of faith.
 - Our only reaction to someone's conversion should be rejoicing.
 - No place for bickering over what someone has or has not experienced along the way.

- Recall that the order of the payout in the parable is central.
 - Our rejoicing with our brothers and sisters who come to know God later in life, regardless of what happened in their past, is essential!
 - We are reminded that salvation is never earned.
 - We give thanks to God that the Body of Christ has grown.
 - We support our new brothers and sisters in Christ, granting them the freedom to grow into the love of God.
 - God's mercy works in significant and often unseen ways. Each of our stories of life with Christ is unique.

- When it comes to salvation, there are no grapes nor cucumbers. The payment is full, and infinite, to each. Thank God for that.

Tags: fairness, grace, monkeys, psychology, salvation

About the Preaching with the Sciences Initiative

A primary way Roman Catholics explore their faith and nourish their spirituality is by participating in Sunday Mass and actively engaging in the homily. However, few preachers explicitly connect faith or spirituality with science. The Preaching with the Sciences initiative, made possible by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, gathers scientists and leading homileticians to explore the positive contributions science can make to preaching, and consequently contribute to more contemporary modes of believing. Such contributions are grounded in the rich imaginations that scientists bring to their work as well as in scientific discoveries that have a potential for revealing religious truths and even shedding new insight on ancient teachings and beliefs.

With guidance from world-renowned scientists with differing areas of expertise, a select number of homileticians will draft homily outlines for preaching key Sundays and feast days across the 3-year lectionary cycle. Over 100 homily outlines will highlight some of the way's sciences and the contemporary search for religious meaning can interface. These free homiletic resources have the potential to influence thousands of preachers seeking help each week in crafting sermons and helping to shape a scientifically informed religious imagination among future preachers.