

[Texting Question: **Finish the sentence: Life's not fair;...?**]

Quite a range of answers there. Did you notice that our first impulse isn't to deny the statement? No one says, Oh, I dunno, life seems pretty fair to me! Even kids know life doesn't always go how you want it to... Each of us has experienced a time you've looked at a situation and seen that there's only one spot. Maybe there's a promotion available at work. Maybe you're selling in a competitive market. Or your kid's trying out for a select team. Or that spot in the school musical. Or maybe it's not as defined as that. Maybe you just have a sense that there's not enough to go around. Enough... money? Acclaim? Business? Opportunity? Love?

Whatever the reason, you're not just convinced that life's not fair. You see a scarcity when you look around and you're pretty sure you're on the losing end. That life (or fate? or karma? or God?) has given you the short end of the stick. We've all had the sense we're missing out on the fun, or the reward, or the good life. When kids don't get what they want, they throw a tantrum. You may not throw a tantrum, but you're not above fighting and clawing to get what's yours. Because no one else is going to fight for you.

And this is the point you might be thinking, Oh, here's where we say, But just go to Church and you won't be that way. Church people don't fight and claw; they're nice!

But we know that's not necessarily true, don't we? In fact, among church people there's a special manifestation of this "not fair" mentality. You find it especially among people (like me) who've been in the Church most of our lives. People who have been – for the most part – really morally upright. We didn't have a rebellious streak as teens. We've never been drunk or used any drugs that don't have a prescription attached to them. We probably waited until we were married to have sex. We've been in church probably more than 90% of all the Sundays we've been alive. We read our bibles and pray.

You know... the goody two-shoes. The teachers' pets. The holy rollers. You know those people. And you know how they feel when they look at all the sinners out there. All those people who don't follow God as closely as we do. We look out at the heathens and we feel a deep, burning...

Jealousy.

That's not what you expected, is it? You expected me to say the Holy Rollers look out at the rest of the world and feel... angry. Maybe superior. Definitely judgmental.

Can I let you in on a secret about a lot of us? You might *hear* anger and judgment, but what's often beneath those is a profound sense of unfairness.

It's not fair, we say, that you get to be out having all the *fun*! We would *never* say it out loud, but life with God just isn't very *fun*. It's a lot of rules and regulations and making sure you're always up to code and being sure you don't step out of line.

Sure, the whole eternal life thing is awesome, but here's the kicker: You sinners can live however you want, have all that fun, and then God will accept you whenever you want.

That's not fair!

Why do *you* get to have all the fun, and we're stuck in here in Church where it's *lame*?

Does that sound familiar to anyone? Are the sinners *and* the saints nodding their heads saying, "That's about right."?

If so, hold on... because Jesus is about to wreck everyone's day in the best way.

This attitude we have is really at the heart of the story we heard last week, of God being like a shepherd who won't rest until he finds one sheep out of 99. Of God being like a schoolteacher, who won't rest until he finds one lost second-grader.

We feel a thrill of excitement at that picture of Jesus. In fact, after Jesus tells the story about the sheep, he tells another story, about a man with two sons. You've probably heard this story before... we call it the story of the Prodigal Son.

But in this series, which we're calling *You Had to Be There*, we're approaching Jesus' parables from a different angle. We're borrowing from a book called *The First Time We Saw Him*, by a good friend of mine named Matt Mikalatos. Matt asks, What would Jesus' stories sound like if he had come to us *today*, instead of Israel 2,000 years ago? So listen to the story of a boy named Frank, who sets out for Hollywood. And remember this story follows close on the heels of the 2nd-Grade Teacher who lost and then found one of his students.

Jesus says,

[Matt's Story: Frank Goes to Hollywood]

It's beautiful, isn't it? This picture of a wayward child's return, and of a father's boundless, restless love? It's no wonder this story is so popular, no wonder the "Prodigal Son" has become a phrase even people who have never read the Bible know.

And it's beautiful because it critiques that "oh-so-fun" lifestyle that gets church people so mad. In fact, anyone who's lived like Frank can tell you it's only fun for so long. After a while, it gets exhausting. Life-draining. It's not a party at all, no matter what it looks like from the outside.

You might be thinking, How could anyone not think this story is just pitch-perfect? But remember: Jesus wasn't telling this story to impress sinners - the people the Prodigal represented. This is how Luke 15 begins:

The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: -- Luke 15:1-3

Jesus tells this story because some religious people were angry with him. They were angry that a person who claims to speak for God would be partying with "bad people". With sinners and tax collectors.

The spark for these stories about lostness *isn't* the lost people. They don't need to be convinced God loves them because God is there with them, in their midst, feasting and partying with them!

No, these stories are for those religious people. Those people who are scandalized by Jesus presence among these sinners. So listen to the end of the story about Frank going to Hollywood. Listen, and imagine you're one of those angry religious people listening:

[Story Pt II]

Do you hear what's at the bottom of his rage? It's scarcity: He *wasted* all your money, and you threw him a huge party! I've worked hard and you never even gave me a frozen pizza!"

Frank's older brother is convinced there's not enough to go around. He's mad that Frank got to go "live life" while he had to stay with the Father and work. It's not fair! And since this isn't a story about Frank and his brother, let's get real:

Jesus is saying to the religious people, Why do you get so mad when people who are far from God get it?

Do deathbed confessions seem a little... too easy? Like why should they get to have fun their whole lives and then get in at the last minute?

People like me, who've grown up in the Church, it's easy for us to feel jaded. We did the right thing our whole lives and we don't get anything for it? No extra reward? No special "Goody-2-Shoes" merit badge? No extra floor in our heavenly mansions? Nothing?

When Jesus shows up, he doesn't hang with us, he parties with the sinners?

I worked my whole life and *nothing*?

It's not fair.

Isn't that fascinating?

Why do we assume Frank's life in Hollywood is so much better than life with the Father on the farm?

Why do we assume life with God is a chore, and those things we call sins are so fun? It's almost as though, when Jesus promised us that following him is the "life that is truly life", we don't believe him.

What does it say about the older brothers' picture of God that they'd rather be out with the whores and drunks? Apparently, from his perspective, he sacrificed a life of fun for a life of work. And now he's bitter because the guy who went off and had all the fun is getting the party.

Is that how you view religion? As a bunch of work that keeps you from having any real fun?

Jesus challenges us to see a bigger picture of God: God is big enough to love the Franks *and* the older brothers. And God is big enough to throw parties where we're all invited.

God didn't exile the older brother to the field. God was begging him to come in and party.

So too, God is begging us all to come into the party. Not the parties Frank threw in Hollywood, the pale imitations of the real parties God knows how to throw. And not the spiteful pity-party the older brother was throwing in the field.

So which will it be: will we stay on the docks, sweating and cleaning up rotting fish like Frank? Or in the field, spiteful and angry in our self-pity like his brother?

Or will we choose to see the Father for who he really is: the God who is enough for each of us, more than enough for all of us? The God who says to the older brother, "Everything I have is yours."

Everything God has is ours. This from the creator of the universe.

Everything God has is ours. Let's use it to throw parties where prodigals find God and spiteful older brothers find God and everyone who thinks life is unfair finds out they're right, that life is *extremely* unfair and that's good news because God's parties are the *best* parties and there's *more* than enough to go around. More than enough grace for the prodigal and the party-pooper. More than enough love for the pot-head and the teetotaler. More than enough life for the down-and-out and the bitter, hard-working loyalist.

God's life is the best life.

God's parties are the best parties. And there's more than enough room for all of us.

Communion Set Up

[Communion Slide] We can only respond today by celebrating the Communion meal. This is a reminder of the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he died. At that meal, Jesus broke bread and passed it around the tables. He told them the bread was his body, broken for them. So we're taking some wafers this morning to represent our brokenness. How we've wasted what God has given us (like Frank did), or how we've become spiteful and judgmental like his brother.

Later in the meal, Jesus passed around a cup of wine. He told them it was his blood, spilled to initiate a new relationship between God and people. We'll dip our wafers in grape juice to remember that God throws the best parties. That Jesus' death was followed by new life, and he makes that same new life available to each of us, saints and sinners alike.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive this meal. This is Jesus' table, not ours. God is calling you to this table, whether you're a Frank or his brother. Whether you're a saint or a sinner. We all need this meal. We all need Jesus. And at the party God's throwing, there's more than enough room for all of us.

So I'm going to pray for us in a moment and then you may come forward. Come up the sides and across the front.

Prayer