

“It’s not fair!” This is the clarion call of many a child who feels that he or she is the victim of a terrible injustice! Today, a new twist is added, that of the collective guilt of the people. Abraham came to the rescue. But by appealing to God’s justice, Abraham boldly asks for even more. Not content with forgiving a few, he asks for forgiveness for the entire city. He does so by appealing to God’s sense of justice.

Pope Benedict XVI cited Genesis 18 in a Wednesday audience:

In this way he brings a new idea of justice into play: not the one that is limited to punishing the guilty, as men do, but a different, divine justice that seeks goodness and creates it through forgiveness that transforms the sinner, converts and saves him.¹

The “collective guilt” tactic was surely employed in my parish grade school– I rather resented begin kept after school because some clown acted up. But in truth, at times it extracted a confession before day’s end. Surely the guilty party did not want to endure the wrath of his classmates who knew! Still, it felt wrong to be blamed *en masse* for what others did.

I saw an article noting that 25% of St. Paul library staff quit during the pandemic. Virtual schools and businesses led to overwhelmed libraries; behavioral problems increased. Patrons no longer felt safe to access library services. A recent spike in auto thefts has left many residents fearful. Is it fair to malign an entire city due to the actions of a few?

But we cannot ignore that the outcry against the unrighteous is real, not feigned. The Lord puts the people and the leaders to a test. So, how did Abraham respond? Upon receiving a favorable reply, Abraham began to press the issue– if 50 would not be enough, what about 45...30... all the way down to 10. You might say that Abraham was “pressing his luck.” I pulled a similar stunt 15 years ago when purchasing a block of airline tickets for a pilgrimage. The “group rate” was more expensive! So, I

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 18 May 2011.

purchased six tickets and then asked the agent to try again before the computer could auto adjusted and changed the price! We repeated it three times and our group saved a collective \$5000. I was still miffed at how much higher group tickets were priced. It wasn't fair- I'll show 'em!

But here is the difference. Abraham was neither "gaming" the system, nor complaining about the rules. Instead, he was creatively making his case, demonstrating his understanding of God's mercy. Pope Benedict XVI concluded: "For through intercession, the prayer to God for the salvation of others, the desire for salvation which God nourishes for sinful man is demonstrated and expressed."² The smaller the number of righteous people becomes, the greater God's mercy is shown to be.

He patiently listens to the prayer, repeating at each supplication: "I will spare... I will not destroy... I will not do it."³ The dialogue with Abraham is a prolonged and unequivocal demonstration of God's merciful love. We learn from this wonderful exchange of mercy that God desires not to punish, but to save. He wants to work with us.

But here is the more difficult lesson for today. Life is not always fair. In a world suffering the effects of original sin, we all fall short. The most academically qualified students do not get accepted to the college of their choice, nor do the most qualified applicants always get hired, not to mention personal tragedies or natural disasters that defy explanation.

For many and varied reasons, too many members of the lay faithful have become distanced from the sacraments, unsure whether they desire to commit themselves each week. Scandal, the pandemic, even confusing messages from Church leadership have not helped the situation. But amid all that- look to the Cross and ask yourself what is fair about that? Why did Jesus, innocent as a lamb, suffer a cruel death for all of us? It was due to his great love. He accepted God's will and did not complain. Perhaps none of it is fair- but it is reality. And from accepting this reality, combined with God's love and grace, we move forward.

² Ibid.

³ See (cf. Genesis 18: vv. 26,28, 29, 30, 31, 32)

There is so much more to our lives than merely avoiding punishment.
With God's sustain grace even amid the injustices of the world, we seek
to bring others to a fullness of life in Christ.