Sunday, August 28, 1977
LIFE IS UNFAIR
Matthew 25:14-30

A few weeks ago, a thoughtful article appeared in the Wall Street Journal by Irving Kristal entitled, “On the Unfairness of Life.” In the first part of the article Mr. Kristal noted that in a prayer book which Jewish people often use during the Feast of the Passover, there is a quotation from Psalm 37. It is a plain statement of fact and reads:

“I have been young and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread.”

In some of the older editions of this prayer book, this quotation is printed in smaller print than the rest of the text, and some Orthodox Jews do not recite it aloud. The reason, according to Mr. Kristal, is that the statement as phrased, strained the credulity of even the most pious, and the rabbis wanted to make it clear that it was really to be interpreted as a declaration of faith rather than an assertion of fact.

The faith, of course, was that in some sense often incomprehensible to us, the visible sufferings of the righteous and innocent, though real enough, are not the ultimate reality — or that life in its long run and final analysis somehow evens out.

The quotation from Psalm 37 was difficult to accept as fact here and now because the pious Hebrews often perceived life here and now as being unfair. The same is true for most of us.

As I talk with people and listen to them, the statement is often made — “Life is unfair.” Recently one person said to me — “Sure life is unfair, but whoever said that it was supposed to be fair or that we human beings, through all of our efforts and institutions, could ever make it completely fair.” As parents, we know that no matter how hard we might try to treat our several children fairly, the children themselves are likely to see our efforts as coming our unfairly.

Then as I thought more about it, I wondered “what do people really mean when they say, ‘life is unfair!'?”

It seems to me that there are at least three kinds or categories of “unfairness” which we sometimes lump together under the general statement “life is unfair.” And some of these kinds of “unfairness” may be more difficult to handle than others.

1. First of all, there is the kind of unfairness that comes through natural disasters or unusual obstacles that block our way or bring unexpected trouble to us. Some might simply call it good luck or bad luck.

Two different families own two different farms. Each farm is about equal in acreage and value. One day a superhighway comes near one farm and not the other and the one farm suddenly becomes worth a great deal more than the other. The increase in value has nothing to do with the effort of the one family or the lack of effort of the other. It just happens. So, the family whose farm did not increase as much in value might say, “Life is unfair.”

Or here is a woman who has lived a quiet, peaceable life. All through the years she never smoked and overall was very careful in taking good care of herself. She ate the right foods, got

plenty of exercise, maybe even took Geritol, and yet one day, quite to everyone's surprise, she is found to have terminal cancer. Yet here is another woman who has never been careful about her health and the way in which she treated her body. She lives to be 95 and has never been in the hospital. One might be tempted to say, "life is unfair."

The other day I heard about a family whose child of 10, was crossing the street, obeying the traffic signals, when from around the corner came an automobile driven by a person under the influence of alcohol. The car hit the child and now she may be crippled for life. The child and her family might certainly be convinced that life is unfair.

A tornado comes through a town, destroys some houses and leaves others untouched in an almost random fashion. Those whose homes are destroyed might conclude that life is unfair. The Bible does not dispute this kind of situation but reminds us that "God makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

There's a freedom and randomness in creation and in us that defies all logical explanation and understanding. So, we simply conclude that life is unfair.

2. There another kind of unfairness in our world which is brought on by our own choices and mistakes — at least we call it unfairness. It's this kind of unfairness that Mr. Kristal was discussing in his article in the Wall Street Journal.

Recently in the debate about whether or not federal Medicaid funds could be used to help pay for abortions, Congress voted to prohibit the use of such funds to pay for abortions. Some of the people who wanted Congress to permit the use of such funds for abortions used the argument that to not permit the use of Medicaid funds for such a purpose would be unfair since poor people would no longer be able to afford abortions while those having enough money could still obtain abortions if they so desired. Thus, they called the vote of Congress unfair because it discriminated against the poor.

In such instances as this, "unfairness" takes on a different dimension. If one views abortions as morally wrong, then is it unfair to not help pay for something which is morally wrong?

This kind of argument caused Mr. Kristol to ask further-- "Is it unfair to the poor to make street prostitution illegal while allowing the wealthy to engage the discreet services of expensive call girls? Or is it unfair to some to force bars to close at midnight, while the wealthy can continue to drink at their private clubs?

In such cases as these a lot depends on one's moral judgment of the particular activity involved. Those with more money will always have more opportunity to indulge their vices than the poor. Does this mean that life is unfair? Is vice or wrongness not equally available to all, unfair? In situations like these, what's fair and what's not fair is more difficult to determine because it ultimately depends on what we understand as right and wrong. What this points out, however, is that before we cry "life is unfair," too quickly, we need in such instances as these to do some further thinking.

3. A third kind of unfairness in the world is often seen in the fact that we human beings are unequal in ability, skill, and talent. Some people, for example, have all kinds of athletic skills, others of us are more limited in such ability. Some people have beautiful singing voices and for others of us, no matter how much training we secure, our voice will never equal that of someone else. Some are born with very healthy physical bodies and others are not nearly so

healthy in both body and mind. This kind of inequality in ability is — all around and is a fact of everyday life. It causes some to say — "Life is unfair."

What then does our Christian faith. have to say about the unfairness we see and experience in our lives here and now?

1. First of all, our faith does not deny that life deals different hands to different people. Some people have strokes of luck that some others do not have. Some people happen to be in the right place at the right time and others find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lightning strikes at random. It's simply a fact of life. If we want to call it unfair, then it's unfair, but life goes on. Whether or not someday in the total scheme of things it will all fit together and make sense, we simply don't know. All we can do for now is to do the best with the hand that life deals to us.

2. Secondly, however, we do have choices to make all through life and some of these choices will certainly affect what happens to us for good or for ill. If I choose to ignore all the practices of good health, it's more likely than not that I may be sick more than someone else. If I am continually a careless driver, it's more likely than not that I will have an accident and cause trouble for myself in addition to causing trouble for others. In a similar vein, all poverty is not caused by social injustice, just as all crime is not caused by the environment in which people live. Some studies even show that people who claim to be "accident prone," are not just inherently so, but bring some of the accidents upon themselves.

3. This means thirdly that some of what we see as unfairness in our lives may not be unfairness at all. In the parable of the prodigal son, the son who stayed home and worked and lived with his father thought it unfair that his father should welcome the brother home with a big party and complete forgiveness. He assumed that the kind of life his brother lived when he was away from home and squandering his money and wasting his life, was somehow more fun and better than the life he had while staying home and he was jealous. In other words, sometimes we perceive life as being unfair or us being treated unfairly because of the comparisons we make.

A woman's neighbor lives in a bigger and more spacious house and by comparison she might come to think this is unfair. We can falsely assume that because someone has more than we do in wealth or in ability that they are therefore happier and better off than we in all aspects of life. Yet very few of us would change places totally with another person — totally! Not just our small house for their larger one, but totally, their problems for our problems, the whole thing. Sometimes life has a way of evening itself out in ways that are not always clear to us at the time.

Furthermore, I have known people who have suffered a great deal through illness, or the death of a loved one, or other tragedy and who have come through the experience being a more beautiful and sensitive person than one could ever imagine. On the other hand, I have known people who have gone through similar experiences and have become bitter, insensitive, narrow, and hateful persons. None of us would willingly choose suffering or tragedy to come into our lives, but there are some who handle it superbly. They take what is given and turn it into something magnificent.

Such people are really like the person who kas given five talents in the parable. After all, this is not a parable primarily about making money. The parable of the talents reminds us that in God's eyes, it's not important what we have or what's been given us, good or bad, but rather

what we do with what comes our way. Those who handle in the right way what's given them will find that things work out for the best in the long run. Those who are afraid of life and shrink back from what comes their way will find themselves shrinking farther and farther. That's what Jesus n1ea.nt when he said, "For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

Above all remember this: Even though there is no completely satisfactory answer to some of the unfairness in life which we experience, it is the good news of the gospel that there is an ultimate unity rooted in the divine life from which we all emerge. All creation participates in it. And therefore, we all participate in one another. Because of this we participate in each other's having and in each other's not having. When we become aware of this connection, this harmony of all creation, something happens to us. The fact that others do not have some skill or talent or whatever changes the character of our having. It undercuts our security and drives us beyond ourselves, to understand, to give, to share, to help. And once we begin to do this, the experience of unfairness in life does not bother us quite so much. Amen.