

It's not fair

Isaiah 53:6

March 22, 2015

Life isn't fair.

The University of Northern Iowa Panther men's basketball team had a better won/loss record than Iowa State, a higher national ranking, and fared equally well against two common opponents, and yet the NCAA selection committee awarded Iowa State a "No. 3" seed and UNI a "No. 5" seed. Life isn't fair.

I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth, but I was born with a stainless steel spoon sitting ready and waiting for me at the table. My family did not have much, but we had enough, enough to get by. There was always something to eat and always somewhere warm and comfortable and safe to sleep. It has always been a wonderment to me, that starting with almost nothing -- Lynne and I used to eat macaroni and cheese four times a week when we were first married because it cost 19¢ a box! -- it is a wonderment to me that I have been blessed with so much, with good jobs, dependable vehicles, a house, a house in Maine, with more than enough to live on.

But I didn't start with nothing. I was born in the United States, the eldest male child of Caucasian parents who put a premium on good education. What if I had been born in a different place, to different parents? Who knows what my life might be? What if I had been born a woman, a black woman, the youngest of six children born to a single mother in the slums of Port-au-Prince, Haiti? Why am I here and not there? Why am I privileged to have what I have while so many have so little? Life isn't fair.

Kayla Mueller died at age 26. She was killed -- who knows how? -- while being held by ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Kayla dedicated her life to helping people. She provided support to Tibetan refugees in India, to Palestinian children in the occupied territories, to African refugees in Israel, to Syrian refugees in Turkey, and to homeless women and children in her own hometown of Prescott, Arizona, and that is just an abbreviated list of the people she served in her twenty-six years.

While working in Turkey, she traveled to Aleppo, Syria, to spend one day -- one day! -- working in the Doctors Without Borders hospital. As she left the hospital she was abducted by ISIS militants and was held captive for eighteen months until they announced her death in February. She came to heal wounds, but died of her own. She came to make peace, but died at the hands of men making the worst kind of war. Life isn't fair.

Life isn't fair, but at least we can take solace in the fact that God is fair. Can't we? Isn't God fair?

*All of us were like sheep that were lost,
each of us going his own way.
But the Lord made the punishment fall on him,
the punishment all of us deserved.*

No. God isn't fair.

God isn't fair to "all of us," to all of us who are like lost sheep, each of us doing our own thing, going our own direction, often heedless of each other, often heedless of God. God does not give all of us what we so richly deserve!

No, instead God provides forgiveness and healing. Instead God seeks in holy love to save us from our aimlessness and sin. Instead God lifts us up and brings us together and makes us whole. That is grace, God's amazing grace, and grace, by definition, is not fair! Or would you rather that God were fair to us?

God is not fair to "all of us" and God is not fair to "him."

*The Lord made the punishment fall on him,
the punishment all of us deserved.*

He is chosen by God to suffer the consequences of human aimlessness and sin. But who is "he?"

I hope you know by now, because this has been the focus of our entire Lenten series! He is "my servant," the Lord's servant. And Isaiah explicitly identifies the Lord's servant as ... Israel. Israel, God's people, a community of men and women, chosen by God to make God known, chosen by God to serve God's purposes, chosen by God to do God's will.

"He" is Israel. Who, then, is "all of us?" "All of us" are the nations, the peoples of the rest of the world, all the peoples of this world going their own way, doing their own thing, often heedless of each other, often heedless of God: Babylon, Syria, Egypt, Edom, Moab. Israel's task is to be a light to them, a light of justice, a light of shalom, a light of salvation. Israel's task is to bless them, to be the channel through which God may bring to them the blessing God has intended for all people from the beginning.

How? How does Israel fulfill her task? This way: by being despised and rejected, by enduring suffering and pain, by taking the way sacrifice, the way of love. It is in the midst of Israel's weakness that God's power is made known. It is in the midst of Israel's suffering that God's love, for them and for all the world, shines through.

The Lord's servant, the one who suffers the punishment all of us deserve, is Israel. But Israel inherited that task from Abraham, their ancestor. It has been their task, their calling as a people, from the beginning. And Jesus inherits that task from Israel! He is the Lord's servant. He is the light to the nations. He is the one through whom God is made known. He is the one in whom God's glory is revealed ... through suffering.

And Jesus call us to follow. We are called, as a people, to be the Lord's servant, As a people, as a community, not just one by one by one, but together. Together making God known. Together bringing blessing to all nations, to all peoples. Together making shalom. How? The same way Israel did. The same way Jesus does. We bring blessing to the world by following Jesus.

And what does it mean to follow Jesus? Listen!

*All of us were like sheep that were lost,
each of us going his own way.
But the Lord made the punishment fall on him,
the punishment all of us deserved.*

The world is hurting. The world is lost. The people of this world are divided against each other, hurting each other and themselves, going this way and that way, pulling in different directions, pulling each other apart. Someone needs to acknowledge the pain. Someone needs to see the pain and go to the pain and take on the pain and absorb the pain. Someone needs to drink the cup, the cup of suffering. Someone needs to drink it dry, until suffering itself is exhausted, until death itself is swallowed up ... in victory!

This is what Jesus did, once and for all, for us and for all. And this is now what Jesus calls us to do, for each other, for all. God's power is made known in the midst of our weakness, and God's love is made known through our willingness to suffer.

No. God isn't fair. God chooses to be faithful even when we are unfaithful. God seeks us even as we are running away. God loves us -- God loves the world -- even when the world turns its back. God chooses grace, and that is not fair.

God isn't fair. But what about life? What about the things in this life that seem so unfair?

Take this for what it's worth: UNI won its first round game, Iowa State did not.

And the woman born into poverty in Haiti? I met a number of Haitian women during my visit to Port-au-Prince twenty-four years ago, many of them filled with joy and compassion and dignity and faith and hope, the likes of which few of us have!

And Kayla Mueller? Listen as I read a few of the items from a handwritten bulleted list found by Kayla's parents in her room after her abduction, perhaps a list of goals or dreams or simply her expression of what she has come to find precious in this life ...

- *living and working with people*
- *stark/beautiful landscape*
- *parts of you, you didn't know existed*
- *risks, adventure*
- *seize moment, sip wine*
- *transform*
- *unlikely pleasures*
- *insights into the wonder of everyday*
- *what's important?*
- *gaze more closely at the wonder of the world around us*
- *who you meet, what you see/taste/do/touch*
- *where you go and why?*

We know where she went and we know why. Her own words give us a glimpse of her passion for life, of her love for the earth and for the people who fill it. Her life may have been short, but can we honestly say too short? Too short for what? Her life was full, so full. She experienced more, did more, did more for people, made more of tangible impact on this world in her twenty-six years than I have in my sixty-two!

Was it fair that she died so soon, so needlessly? Was it fair what she offered so freely, so fully of herself, to all of us, to all of us?

Grace isn't fair. Praise God for God's glorious grace! And praise God for the glory of the grace shown in the lives of people like Kayla Mueller, and in the lives of people like you.