

“Our Moral Compass: Fairness”

James 2:1-5

I Corinthians 11:17-26

October 5, 2008

The Rev. Christine Chakoian

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

World Communion Sunday

What a week it's been! These are wild times we're living in – and my theory is that in large part it's due to globalization. What are the signs? I know I'm living in a global village when I'm at a meeting in Beirut and I learn what to expect on my daughter's first day of college from a Lebanese professor whose son also attends University of Chicago. I know I'm living in a global village when NPR features football players Trinity High School in suburban Dallas engaging in a Pacific-Islander pre-game chant and war dance because their star quarterback is from Tonga. I know I'm living in a global village when some people I know were buying and banking euros this week “just in case.” “The world is flat” indeed.

In times like this, it's hard to remember where we are! The familiar “road signs” of social traditions and values are changing so fast. Now, social values are a two-edged sword: they can stultify, as when it was “obvious” that women shouldn't be educated, or blacks were inferior to whites. But traditions also give healthy boundaries to behaviors and expectations. Without those social structures in place, psychologists have shown, we are prone to our worst brute instincts. How do we find our way? When the old road maps won't due, we need a Global Positioning System. Here's the good news: even without the firm social structures we once counted on, God has given us a moral compass.

In fact, we're hard-wired with it. In studies of over 200,000 people across different cultures around the world, five moral instincts show up *everywhere*: purity, fairness, not harming others, authority, and

community. Different societies interpret them and weigh their relative importance differently, but they are universal human moral instincts. And it is my conviction that we go off course when we ignore any of them. Last week we looked at the compass point of purity. Today we will explore fairness.

Of all of the moral virtues, fairness is still strong in America today. We value fair-play in sports. We teach our children to play by the rules, fair and square. We think cheating is wrong: so wrong that it's tacky and desperate. As divided as America may be between liberals and conservatives, Red States and Blue States, a unifying trait among Americans of all stripes is the high value we place on fairness. The same rules should apply to everyone.

It's been this way since our inception. In words as close to a creed as our nation gets, we all memorized these words from the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The Constitution encoded fairness; and just in case, in 1791 the Bill of Rights was added to institutionalize fairness into our country's DNA ([http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/charters\\_of\\_freedom\\_7.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/charters_of_freedom_7.html)).

Fairness – the same rules applying to everyone – has been a core American value from the beginning. And yet ... and yet there has also always been a disconnect between this sacred ideal and our all-too-human reality. In reality, only male land-owners counted among those who were "all created equal." And as early as September, 1776, just two months after signing the Declaration of Independence, John

Adams despaired of the corruption among leaders, and the indifference of the populace: “Unfaithfulness [among leaders] is deeply criminal. But there is no encouragement to be faithful. Neither profit, nor honor, nor applause is acquired by faithfulness. There is too much corruption, even in this infant age of our Republic. Virtue is not in fashion. Vice is not infamous” (cited in David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 160). I don’t know whether to be heartened or appalled that it’s always been this way.

Yet it shouldn’t surprise us. We are human. There has *always* been a disconnect between our moral aspirations and our actions, and we must always vigilantly expect better of ourselves. But there is a peculiar and unexpected blessing during times of immense change. In times of change – times like the one we’re living in – we don’t just notice whether we’re *applying* the rules fairly. *We also start questioning the fairness of the rules themselves.*

This is exactly what was going on in our Scripture lessons today. As you may recall, the era of the early church was also a period of globalization. The Roman Empire and its fantastic road system brought commerce and people together as never before. Now, the downside is destabilization that up-ends everything, including cherished traditions and values. The upside is destabilization that calls into question “obvious” rules. One of the most obvious rules of the Empire was its hierarchical division of people. To tweak one of my parent’s favorite expressions, there was a place for everyone, and everyone had their place. Educated Greeks didn’t mix with minorities like Jews; men didn’t mix with women; and upper classes certainly didn’t mix with lower classes, especially slaves. We don’t think much about it now, but the early church shocked people when the followers

of Jesus *questioned that rule and mixed with each other*. In the radical words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). It seems obvious to us now, but it wasn’t obvious at all then. And they had to painstakingly grow into the new rules of fairness. James had to remind his people: when you show the person in fine clothes the finest seat in the house, and tell the poor person in dirty clothes to go stand and wait in the Narthex, aren’t you dishonoring Jesus? Paul had to remind his people: when you bring your offerings of food for the Lord’s supper, and you keep them to yourself, while the poor person next to you goes hungry, aren’t you humiliating a brother or sister in Christ? From the very beginning, Jesus’ followers have had to ask ourselves not just whether we’re applying the rules fairly ... we’ve had to ask whether the rules are fair, fair to *all* the children of God.

Those are always the hardest questions. But when we dare to ask them, amazing things happen. Let me give you some real-life examples. The abolitionist movement – which included leaders from this very church – the abolitionist movement wasn’t content to ask whether slaves were being treated decently – it called into question the very rules endorsing slavery. The Suffrage movement didn’t just ask whether husbands and fathers were treating their wives and daughters legally – it called into question rules denying women the right to vote and, concomitantly, to be educated and own property. The civil rights movement didn’t just ask whether African Americans had rights – it called into question rules that kept them separate; separate from , among other things, racial intermarriage –which was not legalized across America until 1967 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interracial\\_marriage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interracial_marriage)). Most recently,

another movement has called into question rules barring same-sex couples to legally unite. I was frankly *astonished* at the vice-presidential debate when Palin agreed with Biden on this issue. But I shouldn't have been so amazed ... because fairness is such a strong point on our moral compass, and every age of massive change has called into question rules that used to be "obvious."

And I suspect that this is precisely what is going on in the "Main Street" reaction to the "Wall-Street bail-out." People are angry, in part because the rules don't seem to be applied fairly: even more, they are moved to call into question the rules themselves. Why are some companies spared, while others crumble under their own weight? Why are corporations given a reprieve, when so many mortgage-holders aren't? Why do taxpayers bear the burden of bad decisions, even though they didn't make them? Why do CEOs get golden parachutes, while thousands of their workers are laid off? What were the regulations governing financial markets that allowed this disaster to unfold in the first place? Don't get me wrong: precious few people believe the bail-out is a bad decision. Die-hard free-market capitalists and liberals alike knew this *had* to be done to save our economy. But it has prompted millions to call into question the fairness – not just fairness in applying the rules, but *fairness in the rules themselves*. We do not yet know the answers. But blessed are those who are willing to ask the hard questions.

This is a gift to us – an unwelcome gift, but a gift nonetheless. Because every time we ask "why is it the way it is?" Every time we ask "Are the rules fair – not just in the way they're applied, but in the results they achieve?" Every time we ask not just whether *we* consider it fair, but whether *God* considers it fair ... we come closer to the highest moral aspiration of our hearts. God, I am convinced, doesn't

just care whether we apply health care laws fairly but whether all of his children receive the care they need to live. God doesn't just care whether the rules of national sovereignty are applied fairly but whether genocides are allowed to happen. And on this World Communion Sunday, I am sure that God doesn't just care whether we play by the rules of global food distribution but whether the rules allow the world's starving children to live.

Don't get me wrong. Anarchy is reprehensible. As long as we have rules, we must play by them fairly. Entitlement is a plague on our nation, and no one should be above the law. We must still fight the battle that John Adams set before us long ago: calling ourselves and our leaders to be faithful, encouraging fairness with "profit, honor, and applause" if need be. We must keep fighting corruption, which, as Adams said, has made virtue unfashionable and vice the ticket to fame. It is especially dangerous in fast-changing times like these, when the old rules don't seem to apply. The road-map keeps changing, and it's not easy to see what direction we're supposed to go. But that's what our moral compass is for. To check whether we're playing fairly by the rules. And also to make sure we're playing by rules that are fair. Amen.