

Does God love you? Okay, then, enjoy that love.

One of my favorite books to read to my kids when they were little was this book called Ferdinand. It's by Munro Leaf. Even though my kids are older now, I still really like this book, so we'll have a little bit of story time this morning in church.

*Once upon a time in Spain there was a little bull and his name was Ferdinand. All the other little bulls he lived with would run and jump and butt their heads together, but not Ferdinand. He liked to sit just quietly and smell the flowers. He had a favorite spot out in the pasture under a cork tree. It was his favorite tree and he would sit in its shade all day and smell the flowers.*

*Sometimes his mother, who was a cow, would worry about him. She was afraid he would be lonesome all by himself. "Why don't you run and play with the other little bulls and skip and butt your head?" she would say. But Ferdinand would shake his head. "I like it better here where I can sit just quietly and smell the flowers." His mother saw that he was not lonesome, and because she was an understanding mother, even though she was a cow, she let him just sit there and be happy.*

*As the years went by Ferdinand grew and grew until he was very big and strong. All the other bulls who had grown up with him in the same pasture would fight each other all day. They would butt each other and stick each other with their horns. What they wanted most of all was to be picked to fight at the bull fights in Madrid. But not Ferdinand—he still liked to sit just quietly under the cork tree and smell the flowers.*

*One day five men came in very funny hats to pick the biggest, fastest, roughest bull to fight in the bull fights in Madrid. All the other bulls ran around snorting and butting, leaping and jumping so the men would think that they were very very strong and fierce and pick them. Ferdinand knew that they wouldn't pick him and he didn't care. So he went out to his favorite cork tree to sit down. He didn't look where he was sitting and instead of sitting on the nice cool grass in the shade he sat on a bumble bee.*

*Well, if you were a bumble bee and a bull sat on you, what would you do? You would sting him. And that is just what this bee did to Ferdinand. Wow! Did it hurt! Ferdinand jumped up with a snort. He ran around puffing and snorting, butting and pawing the ground as if he were crazy. The five men saw him and they all shouted with joy. Here was the largest and fiercest bull of all. Just the one for the bull fights in Madrid! So they took him away for the bull fight day in a cart.*

*What a day it was! Flags were flying, bands were playing...and all the lovely ladies had flowers in their hair. They had a parade into the bull ring. First came the Banderilleros with long sharp pins with ribbons on them to stick in the bull and make him mad. Next came the Picadores who rode skinny horses and they had long spears to stick in the bull and make him madder. Then came the Matador, the proudest of all—he thought he was very handsome, and bowed to the ladies. He had a red cape and a sword and was supposed to stick the bull last of all. Then came the bull, and you know who that was, don't you. Ferdinand. They called him Ferdinand the Fierce and all the Banderilleros were afraid of him and the Picadores were afraid of him and the Matador was scared stiff.*

*Ferdinand ran to the middle of the ring and everyone shouted and clapped because they thought he was going to fight fiercely and butt and snort and stick his horns around.*

*But not Ferdinand. When he got to the middle of the ring he saw the flowers in all the lovely ladies' hair and he just sat down quietly and smelled. He wouldn't fight and be fierce no matter what they did. He just sat and smelled. And the Banderilleros were mad and the Picadores were madder and the Matador was so mad he cried because he couldn't show off with his cape and sword. So they had to take Ferdinand home. And for all I know he is sitting there still, under his favorite cork tree, smelling the flowers just quietly. He is very happy. The end.*

It's a charming story, isn't it? Here's another story. A man named got up in the morning and he got a job working in a field. His boss said if he did a fair day's work he'd get a fair day's pay. He did a fair day's work and he got a fair day's pay. He had money to buy dinner for his family and they all ate a good dinner just quietly and they were very happy. The end. So, everything is also nice in that story and it has a happy ending too.

The reason I read you the story of Ferdinand is not just that it is a charming story. The reason I read you that story is that it illustrates so vividly the key point that enables us to understand today's gospel reading, which is: you don't have to make everything in life into a competition. You can choose sometimes to sit just quietly and smell the flowers. There are certainly areas in life in which good competition can add a sense of fun, and there are certainly areas in life in which good competition can give you the extra motivation to do your best. That's all well and good. Enjoy.

The times when we get ourselves into trouble are the times when the competitive urge sneaks into areas of our life where it doesn't belong, and we forget that competitiveness is not the only way to have relationships with the people around us.

Let's look at the guy from the second story. He's the one who does a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, and he has money to buy dinner for his family and they all eat a good dinner just quietly and they are very happy. Let's call this guy Fred. What's the difference between Fred and the irate guy in today's parable? They have exactly the same experiences, except that the guy in the parable makes life into a competition and so he feels miserable. Fred makes life into life and so he feels happy. The end.

It really is that simple. If Fred does a fair day's work for a fair day's pay he's happy. And how much someone else works and how much someone else gets paid are completely irrelevant to Fred's happiness, as he eats a good dinner. Just as how much applause another bull gets in the bullfighting ring is irrelevant to Ferdinand, as he smells the flowers.

Our first response to today's parable might be, "but it's not fair." Jesus understands that, and he tells us this parable so we'll have a chance to see how far a competitive mentality has sneaked into our lives. As the manager says, "You did a fair day's work, you got a fair day's pay, just as we agreed. What's not fair about that?"

It's true. The manager hasn't taken away anything from the worker; the manager hasn't done anything less than give the fair day's pay as they'd agreed. The manager goes on with the deeper questions, the questions about generosity: I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?

Ouch. Do we really not want God to be generous to another human being?

Let's look a bit further under the surface here. As we ask questions of this parable, the parable asks questions of us, questions that challenge our assumptions. We assume that we know whose situation is better: we assume that it's better not to work than to work and bear the heat of the day. But if I look further under the surface, I find that I would much rather spend my day getting something accomplished and doing something productive, secure in the knowledge that at the end of the day I would be fairly paid and would be able to provide food for my family. Spending an entire day waiting in a line, unemployed, worrying every hour as it becomes less and less likely that there will be a job, worrying the whole time that I will have to come home to my family empty-handed and explain to them that they will have to go hungry tonight. I would hate spending seven hours of the day like that. Every minute of that kind of waiting and worrying seems like an hour, and every hour seems like an eternity. I'd much rather be out working in the field than standing around in the unemployment line worrying, wouldn't you? And if someone can tell that poor unemployed guy who's been worrying all day, "hey, come work for an hour" and then gives him some money to feed his kids after all, am I really going to begrudge him that? Am I really going to insist that we must have some kind of a competition between the unemployed guy and me? And that I must get more money because the winner of the competition must be me? Come on, just let the boss give the poor guy some money.

The generous boss, of course, is God. And the parable leads us to some uncomfortable questions. Who are the people you think God shouldn't forgive? Who are the people you think God shouldn't let into heaven? Who are the people you think aren't as good Christians as you are?

Are you envious because God is generous? I confess that I sometimes am. Then again, I also think, "I wouldn't want to be those people; I wouldn't want to live inside

their heads.” When I think about it, I don’t truly envy them. So if God wants to be generous to them, that’s no skin off my nose. In fact, they could use some generosity; that’s a good thing. And God’s been generous to me in a whole host of ways. I’ve had plenty of blessings in my life, far more than I could ever deserve.

Do we really want to have faith competitions with other people? Do we really want to tell them: “You lose! Your faith is so inferior to mine! You ought to feel really bad about yourself because I’m a better Christian than you!” Um, no. God is generous and that’s a good thing. God is generous to us. God is generous to them. Does God love them? Yes. Does God love you? Yes. Enjoy that love.

We don’t have to compete. We can sit just quietly and smell the flowers. We can be very happy. The end.