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Most of you know by now that Ireland is one of my most favorite places on the face of this planet. I might have mentioned in the past the beautiful stone walls that lace the countryside in places like County Cork in southern Ireland. I, like most people, assume that these famous walls that you see on postcards have been built to divide land into small fields. In some cases that is true, but in many other cases, these walls have a different history.

Some of these walls are called Famine Walls. They are called Famine Walls because they were built during the Potato Famine in the 1840's. During this unprecedented famine, 1 million Irish people died, mostly poor, rural peasants who had no other food supply to depend upon, other than the potato. Hungry men were hired by their landlords to build these walls in order to earn a bowl of soup for their families. These walls have no

significance in regards to property lines, they were simply ordered to build walls....this also benefited the landowners because, in building these walls out of stones, these starving peasants also cleared the land of stones for future planting. The men were told to build walls, up hillsides, across the fields, direction didn't matter, as long as they kept working. These men were starving, and spent 18 hours a day lifting stones and placing them, one on top of the other...working for food they themselves would never see or touch or eat, out of sheer hope that their families might get a bite to eat.

Some of the most famous Famine Walls run down hillsides, across the beaches and right into the Atlantic Ocean. The men were ordered to keep building, even as the tide came in, even as they drowned and died. It was a cataclysmic time for the Irish people, burying one out of every ten people, and then losing two million people to immigration. The rest of the world was slow to act, suffering early on from compassion fatigue...in other words,

they got so used to hearing about the poor, starving Irish peasants that they stopped listening. It was viewed as some sort of natural selection method of population control...a way to finally rid the country of some of its poorest people.

These Famine Walls are testimonies to humankind's inability to understand justice. When a starving man is worked to death so that his family might eat, and when the world fails to respond to such a catastrophe, the kindest word you can use to describe the situation is unjust.

We don't understand justice...on a global level, on a national level or even on a local level. We might not understand justice, but the prophet Amos does. He's all about justice. In our first reading for today, Amos condemns the rich for trampling on the poor, for building houses out of stone built by the poor, drinking wine from vineyards tended by the poor...he warns the rich of God's wrath for failing to take care of the poor.

Not much has changed since the time of the ancient prophets like Amos. We still trample the poor. We still take advantage of the poor. We still try our best to ignore the poor. If we force the poor to build walls out into the ocean as the tide comes in, they will drown and die, and it will be as if they never existed in the first place. This is human justice, it always has been, and always will be.

God's justice is different.

God's justice is to send his Son to the earth, where he eats and drinks with the poor, where he preaches to the despicable ones, where he touches and heals the filthy ones. Jesus comes to earth in order to lift up the ones that the world has brought low. Jesus comes to earth to love the ones that the world hates, to embrace the ones we can't even bring ourselves to look at.

God's justice is to think of your neighbor before you think of yourself, to give your bowl of soup to someone who's hungry without humiliating them first.

There is a fascinating Jewish tradition of heaven and hell. In this image, heaven and hell look exactly the same, with endless guests seated at a banquet table that groans under the weight of the food it bears. In hell, each guest has forks for arms, about a meter long. The torment is that, with such long forks as arms, you can never manage to get a bite of food into your own mouth. In heaven, each guest also has meter long forks for arms, but they use their arm/forks to feed the person across the table, and the person across the table feeds them.

We are no different, the rich and the poor. We are all hungry for something, either for food or approval or love or recognition...we are all hungry for something. The rich might have homes and clothes and titles, but

underneath it all, we are all just people, very, very broken people...under it all, we are all naked as the day we were born. And that's what God sees. God sees us for who we are, for the real person underneath all our worldly stuff. If God is not impressed by our homes and clothes and titles, then neither should we be.

Underneath it all, the rich man is the same as the man with leprosy. Underneath it all, Mary Magdalene is the same as the prostitute. Underneath it all, the disciples are the same as the demon-possessed ones who live among the graves. In God's eyes, we are all laid bare, naked before the One who created us.

I find tremendous comfort in this, knowing that I don't need to impress God, and neither do you. You don't need to inflate your bank account, you don't need to fib about your golf game, you don't have to lie about your grade point average, you don't need to pretend you are fine when

in reality you are not fine. Before God's eyes, you are naked, and you are laid bare for who you really are...and, in this way, God looks at you in the very same way a new mother looks at her newborn baby, seconds after the birth...that tender and fierce love that the mother has for her child, knowing she loves that baby so much, even only seconds after birth...loves that baby so much that she knows she would die for it if she had to...which is exactly how God looks at you, naked and squirming and blinking as a newborn baby....God's justice is to love you regardless of wealth or rank or intellect....God's justice is to love you no matter who you are or what you've done...God's justice is to look at you with such a tender and fierce love, that he knows he would die for you, and in fact, he does, even without our asking him to. God's justice is to give you a place at his eternal banquet table, with food you did not earn and do not deserve....and you are fed, not by your own two hands, but by the hands reaching across the table, hands

that used to belong to either a king or a beggar, but at this table, none of that matters remotely.