

God is not fair. In fact, God couldn't care less about what's fair and neither does Jesus. The kingdom of God is not a kingdom ruled by fairness, but one ruled by grace. Many of the parables that Jesus tells his disciples are attempts to describe the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven by using situations from their everyday lives. This kingdom is not an ethereal far off place like what we might think of as heaven, but rather the way of God. It is God's vision, not for life after death, but for an earthly life that is ruled by divine values.

The parable this morning is yet another attempt by Jesus to explain the way God works to the disciples. These 12 men and likely some unnamed women, have just heard a different parable in which Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. In response, Peter says what about us? What about those of us who have given up everything and have followed you from the very beginning? In a sense he is asking, don't we get something for being your followers the longest? And so Jesus responds with this parable.

If we are honest with ourselves, this parable is both comforting and troubling at the same time. It messes with the way we have been taught the world is supposed to work. The story starts out normal enough. A land owner is looking for laborers to work in his vineyard. He goes to the marketplace and hires the workers after agreeing to pay them the usual daily wage. But after this initial scene, the story gets increasingly strange. For an unexplained reason, the land owner returns to the marketplace multiple times throughout the day. The text doesn't say he returned to the marketplace for the purpose of hiring more workers. One would think that the landowner would have

hired all the workers he needed in the morning. The text says that when he went out, he saw the other laborers standing idle and once he sees them, he offers them work. We get the feeling the landowner isn't hiring the workers because he needs them but because the workers need a job. He does not make the same arrangement for pay with these later workers as he did with the first group. Instead of offering the usual daily wage, he simply says that they will be paid what is right.

At the end of the day, the land owner sees more laborers and asks them why they have been idle all day. They tell him that it is because no one has hired them. I wonder why. I wonder if these workers were people who were weak, or sick, disabled, too old or too young, maybe they were foreigners or had a criminal record. These people for whatever reason, were deemed by other employers as undesirable employees and they had spent their day waiting and hoping for work without success. The landowner tells them to go to the vineyard and promises them nothing. He simply says go.

At the end of the day, when it was time to get paid, the laborers who were hired first thing in the morning were expecting to be paid the amount agreed upon when they were hired. What they weren't expecting was for the people who worked fewer hours to also get the same pay. The landowner didn't cheat those earliest workers. They didn't receive less than what they were promised. So why were they upset? They tell their employer "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." Did you hear it? "You have made them equal to us." That's the complaint. Not that they were treated poorly, but that

others were treated better than the first workers thought they deserved. You can almost hear the workers shouting “It’s not fair!” And you know what. They’re right.

I want to share a brief recording with you. It is a clip from a TV show called Louie. Louie is a divorced dad who has shared custody of his two daughters. In the scene leading up to this clip he is cooking dinner for them and notices that his oldest daughter is reading a book for fun instead of doing her homework. He asks her repeatedly to do her homework but she ignores him. He gets frustrated and raises his voice a little and says something a little harsher than “gosh dangit” I hate being ignored. She finally looks up and says “sorry daddy” and heads into the dining room to start her homework leaving her younger sister in the living room. He goes back to cooking and starts to make a smoothie or something and uses all but one piece of mango. He puts the mango piece on a fork and takes it out to his oldest daughter. We can guess at his motivations for doing this. Maybe he felt bad for raising his voice, maybe he suspected she’d had a hard day. Maybe he knows that homework feels more doable when you’re eating a mango pop.

But then the little sister notices that older sister got a mango pop and she didn’t. That’s where our clip begins. (Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/OAgdo6-GJcs>)

Did you hear the unfairness of the kingdom of God in this clip? Louie tells his daughter “The only time you should look in your neighbor’s bowl is to make sure they have enough.”

The first workers in our parable this morning were satisfied with their wages until they saw that others who worked fewer hours got the same. The complaint is not about

money. It is the idea that people should only get what they deserve, not what they need. But that's not how God works. Instead of fairness, God focuses on grace. In God's kingdom, no one can earn a special seat at the table by working harder, praying longer, volunteering more, or by swearing less, watching less tv, or being less arrogant. But the catch is, the opportunity in God's metaphorical vineyard is itself a gift. Tilling the soil of justice, planting seeds of kindness and hope, watching God water those seeds with the waters of grace and divine love, pulling the weeds of evil in all its forms, and harvesting the fruit of abundant life... this is the work we are invited to do in God's vineyard. This work looks different for different people. For some it is volunteering in the soup kitchen or staying overnight with New Pathways. For others it is protesting against injustice or advocating for the most vulnerable. For still others it is prayer and study and sharing the good news of their faith not to convert but to give hope and comfort. For many of us, it is a combination of these things and more to varying degrees.

I want to be very clear that I am not suggesting that working in God's vineyard is only open to Christians. Working for love and justice is something that people of all faith traditions, and those who do not claim a faith tradition, are capable of doing and invited to do. The vineyard isn't a country club that requires a Christian membership. Working in the vineyard side by side with all who answer the call to this work only produces a more bountiful harvest. But in all of this vineyard work, there is no room for arrogance or jealousy. All are invited into the vineyard, all are invited to the table, all are invited into the kin-dom of God. And whether someone starts their work at the crack of dawn, or just before its time to clock out, God gives all of us the same helping grace. The same helping of love. The same helping of abundant life.

Our challenge then is to attempt to learn to see through the eyes of God. To let go of grudges and judgments of others, to stop looking into our neighbor's bowl to see if they got more than us, even when we have plenty. Are we willing to offer others the same grace that God offers us? This is easier in some areas of our lives than others, right? Some of us might have absolutely no problem welcoming one of our children back into the family after being estranged after a painful fight and love them equally as their sibling. But that same week we might look around the church and find ourselves holding long time parishioners in a higher regard than someone new who is sitting in our favorite pew. For some of us it is easier to offer grace, forgiveness, and love to others than it is to offer it to ourselves. Grace isn't fair. And for us humans, it isn't often easy. But we belong to a God whose grace knows no end. Thanks be to God!