

20 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' ⁷They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, '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.' ¹³But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks Be to God.

Do you remember the parable of the prodigal son? In a couple of weeks here Pastor Homer is going to preach a sermon on that parable, so I don't want to say too much about it, but I do want to say this: I thought I was over it. I thought I had moved past my tendency to be like the prodigal son's older brother--the one who is so angry, so incensed over his father's

unbelievable forgiveness and generosity, hurt that his father can't see that HE's the one who is reliable, who has worked hard, who DESERVES to be treated better than his low-life little brother.

I thought I was over that. But then I went back and read the parable of the workers in the vineyard. And I realized I'm not over it at all.

It's not FAIR! Who does this? Who gives a whole day's pay to someone who works for an hour? Who hires a "day laborer" at 5 o'clock in the evening?!

Let's bring this forward a bit. Imagine this. Imagine walking by your co-worker's desk and—inadvertently, of course—catching a glimpse of his year-end bonus check. **Whoa**, you think. *Not bad—not bad at all*—especially for someone who works PART TIME. You hurry back to your office, thinking—"Geez, if he got that much for twenty hours a week, oh man...it's going to be a merry Christmas!" It's all you can do not to tear up the envelope as you open it up and read...the exact same amount.

Now—QUICK! Before you have time to catch yourself--what's your first thought?

In the movie *Christmas Vacation*, Clark Griswold opens his Christmas bonus—the bonus he had **planned** to use to put in a pool. And with the family all gathered around him in great anticipation, he opens it up and finds that instead of a check with several zeroes, he has instead received a one-year membership to the Jelly of the Month Club.

If you're like Clark—if you're like me—your first thought is, “Hey! They can't DO THAT! That's not fair!”

It's NOT FAIR. It's NOT RIGHT.

The story turns our usual problem with God on its head—usually we wonder and ask God, why do some people get well, and some people don't, why do some have food, and some are hungry. Why was I born to a prosperous family and given all sorts of opportunities, while someone else was born into poverty and not given enough to eat? Our problem is usually that people get **different** results, they are handed a **different** lot in life—some better, and some worse—often for no fault of their own. Why can't everyone be well? Why can't we all have what we need? Why is everything SO UNEQUAL?

That's another sermon for another day. Today, in this parable, we find everyone actually getting what they need, everyone getting an equal reward, and We. Are. Incensed.—we protest, “BUT THEY DIDN'T EARN IT!!”

What Jesus shows us here is not inequality, but rather equality that is so radical that we church folk, we doers of good, we all-day workers can't help but rub up against it.

Now, you may be wondering, “Is this parable really about money?” “Is this about economics?” And the truth is, no, this is not a parable about money, but money sure does drive the point home, doesn't it? The truth is, it's about God. It's about a God whose generosity is sometimes just downright offensive! Who is this giver

of undeserved gifts? **What kind of God** offers the same reward to those who have earned it and those who haven't?

There's another person who had the same feeling about this gracious, generous God. Remember Jonah? Jonah was sent to Nineveh and, following an unfortunate encounter with a large fish or a whale of some sort, Jonah arrives in Nineveh proclaiming, "In 40 days, Nineveh's going to be smashed! Look out, God's going to smite you if you don't repent and change your ways!" So these crazy people—these Ninevites **actually believe him**, and they do—they repent and cry out to God to forgive them. They hold a city-wide fast and everyone prays, and they—even the king—dresses in itchy burlap and they pray that God would forgive them.

And then God has the nerve, the audacity...to forgive them! Meanwhile Jonah stands by watching this powerful scene of forgiveness, and he is moved to...well, to complain: "For I *knew* that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing!" (Have you ever resented God for "abounding in steadfast love"??) "I knew you would do this," he seems to say. "I knew you were like this Lord, but for **them?**"

You see, it keeps coming up, again and again—Jonah, the prodigal son, the parables...in the old testament, in the new testament—again and again we find this God who is unsensibly generous, who is insanely forgiving—SEVEN TIMES SEVENTY, Lord?

What are we to do with a God who is so blind to what we have and have not earned?!

I love the landowner's response to the daylong workers: "Are you envious because I am generous?" More literally, the greek reads, "'Is your eye evil because I am good? Are you giving me the stink eye, are you looking upon your neighbor with envy and jealousy because I am nice?"

But their complaint is not that he was nice. Their complaint is deeper than that. It's deeper than money, deeper than economics. The money is simply a cover-up, a stand-in for something much more difficult—their complaint is this: **You have made them equal to us.**

When I get right down to it, I think I'm better because I work harder. When I can do more, I think I deserve more, I think I've earned more. So, the greater reward—the higher pay—is just confirmation of what I already knew—when I work harder, I'm worth more. In fact, I'm so sure that this is true, that I constantly tell people how hard I work. **Am I busy? You bet I am, because I'm important,** and I can do a lot of stuff.

It's in the air we breathe, friends—the more we do, the better we are. The more productive we are, the more valuable we are. So we get it, we understand, when the workers say, "You have made them equal to us!"

This parable is so challenging because it upsets our world order. It turns our framework upside down and shakes it till all the change falls out. It's like telling you that everything your grandparents ever taught you is wrong! The good news is that God is NOT fair! That God is far too generous to be fair. The good news—

the Gospel—is that God is not interested in what we have and have not earned; God is not interested in what we think we deserve; God is interested in finding some way to give us new life, abundant life—a gift that goes way beyond our earning power, far beyond anything we could deserve. And God is determined to offer us that gift—to go back to the marketplace time after time and see if anyone else is still there, if any more might come to the vineyard.

And so what are we to do? What shall we do with this—we who are here, on Sunday morning in the middle of July—workers in the vineyard? If God's gift is for free—if there is nothing to be earned, then what do we do?

Well, perhaps as a start, we might begin to live out the truth that we are more to God than what we have earned. If your worth cannot be found in your productivity, in your billable hours, in your able-body or your health, in your leadership capacity, but rather your worth can be found in the mystery of a generous God, who made you, who loves you, and who gives you worth—if that is the truth, then how does your day look different? How do you look differently at yourself when you are unemployed or disabled? What do you teach your children about their worth, in relation to their grades, or their performance on the field? How do you balance your time, allowing time for you to be re-created, and reminded of what is most important? And, perhaps most difficult of all—how do you look at others? How do you interact with those whose significance in this world seems pretty small?

Alyce McKenzie, the great preaching professor, tells a story of preparing for the funeral of a well-respected man. He had suffered from Alzheimer's

for the last several years of his life, and so Alyce had missed the opportunity to know him as he once was.

“So I sat around a kitchen table one Saturday afternoon with Bill’s three children and their spouses, his niece, and nephew. I began by asking, ‘If you could express in one sentence what you learned from Bill, what would it be?’ Nobody had to think about the question very long. ‘Give without counting the cost and without expecting a return,’ one of them said quickly. And that sentiment was echoed all around the table.

“Then they started giving examples. ‘He put me through school,’ said his niece. ‘I didn’t even ask; he just knew my folks couldn’t do it.’ ‘He bailed me out of jail,’ said his son. ‘He never gave up hope in me,’ said his nephew. ‘He gave me the gift of somebody believing in me.’ Example after example of a man who knew how to give without counting the cost, without expecting a return. ‘He always made sure his children’s needs were met,’ his daughter said, ‘but sometimes, I admit we felt jealous when he would give time and money to people who weren’t in our immediate family. Now I realize that his example of giving was his greatest gift to us.’”

What shall we do with this God of such extraordinary generosity and infinite compassion? Well, first we will worship him. And then, by his grace, we will imitate him. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Summary: Just like the head of the vineyard, God goes beyond fairness, offering us more grace than we could possibly deserve.