

**Proper 20A, September 20, 2020, St. Anne's**

**Exodus 16:2–15; Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45; Philippians 1:21–30; Matthew 20:1–16**

One of the attributes children seem to be born with is a firm sense of *fairness*. If they think things aren't equal, the slighted one will almost invariably complain 'it's not fair'! It's not *fair* that their older sibling gets to stay up later and *they* have to go to bed. "It's not *fair* that Emma or Liam's parents buy them the latest whatever-is-popular and **I** can't have one." That innate sense of fairness is a powerful and wonderful thing, because when it develops into maturity it's the foundation for a passion for justice and equality: "It's not **fair** that *some* are paid more than others for the same work. It's not **fair** that *some* go to bed hungry while *others* fill landfills with their excess." At its **best** our innate sense of fairness can lead to a strong and life-giving sense of *justice*. But not always. Because our sense of fairness tends to be somewhat ... ego-centric, and so we often default to looking at fairness from the perspective of what seems fair **for us**.

Fairness is an issue that comes up in today's gospel reading. Jesus tells us an odd tale of a landowner who keeps going out and hunting for more and more workers to help with the harvest. And then at the end of the day he pays them all exactly the same amount whether they've worked all day or just one hour. And the workers who've been there *all day*, not surprisingly complain 'It's not **fair** that you've paid *them* the same as us!' When we hear this story we tend to identify with the workers hired first. And so we too think that the ones who've put in more work **ought** to be given more than those who've spent most of the day sitting around in the shade and just came along at the end to put in a token effort. And so this parable is often used as an illustration of God's incredibly generosity to those who don't deserve it.

And of course, God **is** generous with us. But the problem with using that as an explanation for this parable is that the landowner **isn't** particularly generous. At least not in the *amount* he pays. He offers the workers he hires in the morning the 'usual daily wage', one denarius – which was the amount needed to keep a family going for **one** day. In other words, a labourer needs to work *every single day* in order to be able to feed their family *every day*. We are talking here about the poorest of the poor. Folks who've lost their land – probably because of a bad harvest. With no regular way to grow or earn their daily bread, they stand in the town square hoping that some land owner or manager needs extra work done and will hire them. The trouble is, there's usually a lot more labourers than there is labour needed. And there's no social services to fall back on. So if you were both healthy and lucky, you'd get chosen to work. And at the end of a twelve-hour work day you'd receive a day's wage that would provide food for your family for *one* more day. If you were unlucky or unhealthy, however, you'd be passed over, possibly waiting all day, only to return empty-handed to face those whose lives depended on you - knowing none of you would eat that day. *Nothing* in this parable suggests that those chosen to work at 5 *pm* rather than 6 *am* were irresponsible or lazy. More likely, those who'd spent the whole day waiting to be hired would be the weak, the sick, the disabled. Probably the elderly too. No retirement plans here – you work till you can't work any longer, and then you *starve* if you don't have family able to care for you.

That's the situation **all** these labourers are in. And at the end of the day they all get their one denarius – enough to feed their families for one more day. So the generosity is *not* in the *amount* given. The generosity is in giving **all** of

them the usual daily wage regardless of how *much* work they've done. In other words, the landowner is giving to everybody according to their **need**, not on the basis of their **merit**. This landowner wants to make sure **everyone** has enough for the day.

Looked at in this way it doesn't seem quite as unreasonable that the last hired still get their 'daily bread'. And, taken in the abstract, most of us would agree that everyone **should** have enough for their needs. It's a bit more problematical, though, if *achieving* that means that **we** ourselves don't have more than the minimum **we** need to live. Indeed, looked at through the values of *our culture*, it's wrong and even **unfair** to distribute the good things in this world on the basis that everyone gets the same. That's why this parable offends us. We live in a culture with an implicit assumption that some people actually **deserve** more in return for being smarter, harder working, more educated and so on. After all, we put in all those years getting our degrees, building up our careers, spending the long hours - so we **earned** those higher wages. Didn't we? Well, according to the standards of our *world*, yes absolutely. But according to the standards of *God's kingdom* ... sorry, no. In God's kingdom we're all *equal* and we **all** deserve to receive *just enough* for our daily needs - but **not** enough for our *desire* for a comfortable and secure lifestyle. **God's** standard of grace and fairness is everyone according to their **need**. The problem is - those of us who **think** we've **earned** what we have, end up feeling resentful at the idea of **that** kind of fairness.

Sadly, through our own insecurity and lack of trust we usually evaluate our lives **not** through the *abundance* we've *received* but instead by what we feel we still **lack**. And that's corrosive to our *spiritual* well being. Think for a

moment, of what happens to the first-hired day labourers. Rather than feeling fortunate to have found work for the day, they feel cheated at not having received *more* than they agreed to work for. Rather than rejoicing that these other workers - who waited all day hoping and *praying* for the *chance* to work - can return home able to feed their families, they can only begrudge them *their* good fortune. And rather than be grateful for having received an honest day's wage for an honest day's work, they grumble with resentment.

Our culture's icon of "Justice" is a blindfolded woman with scales. Blind, dispassionate, impartial and balanced objectivity. But that's not **God's** justice. God's idea of justice is *never* dispassionate. God wants *all* of us to have what we *need* (not desire - *need*) for each day. Jesus reminds us that God continues to search for us, to call us to be workers *together* in the vineyard. **None** of us are more important. *None* of us are 'more equal' in the eyes of God. We're **all** called to work *together* despite whatever gifts **or** impediments we think we may have - or indeed, that the standards of the world says we *do* have. This is a story about a God who refuses to leave some people without their daily bread but keeps searching us out until everyone is included.

But really, despite our misgivings, God's 'strange calculus of grace' **is** good news for **all** of us. Almost everyone gathered for this worship service today has been gifted with the means to make more money than most people in this world. But – because we are among the fortunate in this world, we don't have to buy into the idea that we are therefore better or more deserving than anyone else. Nor, conversely that we are **less** deserving or should feel guilty for our good fortune. If we allow ourselves to **believe** that God's grace extends to *all* people, *including ourselves*, we are free to be **generous** with what we have.

To share what we have to help make the lives of *everyone* better. To share what we have out of a sense of love and gratitude for **our** blessings and good luck. And thereby to mature into truly **being** people of God's Kingdom of grace and equity for all. Truly **believing** in *God's* idea of fairness frees us to *work* for a world where *everyone* really **does** get what they **need** to live a life of dignity and worth.