

This parable of Jesus is really a tricky one. We have a vineyard owner looking for laborers, going out to the place where day laborers could be found and hiring whoever was there, negotiating with them for the usual daily rate. Then, a few hours later and then at 3pm he goes again looking for laborers at the same place. Those he finds there he also hires, promising them a living wage. And finally, an hour before the work is done, he goes back to the hiring place and scoops up those who have not worked all day and sends them out into his fields. We all know the end of the story. The landowner says that he has a right to be generous as he pleases and leaves it at that.

We, non-vineyard workers, non day laborers, not-disciples, are left in 2017 trying to make a connection between this parable and our own understanding.

Let me draw our attention to two things that can open up our understanding. First, let's notice the story of the wages. The owner negotiates with the first group as to what he can afford for the day, what is a fair wage for him and for them. After this initial wage negotiation, throughout the day, the owner no longer negotiates. With the second and third groups he tells them they will be paid what is right. With the last group, there is no offer of money, there is just a sending into the field. We can wonder if there is even much work to be done by the time the last group is hired. Perhaps the goal of the landowner at this point is pure mercy: "Why are you here?" "No one has hired us." "Come along then into the field." The generosity of the landowner, perhaps, then, begins with this lovely act of charity to go and round up those who had no hope of sustenance. Linger in the hiring place during the day, they perhaps have the taste of despair in their mouths. They stood there hoping

against hope and then hope comes. Generosity begins in being included.

The second thing that helps us unlock the parable for us, then, given this picture of generosity is this question: With whom do we find ourselves identifying in the story? Most probably our identification comes most readily with the first group, the group that has labored all day and wants a special reward because they have labored more in comparison with the last laborers. “What?!” we say and feel indignantly. “Why do they get mercy and generosity when I have worked so hard? Why the generosity to them and not compensatory generosity to me?” How quickly resentment comes. How quickly the blessing of getting a day of work gets turned into resentment when the 8 o’clockers start making comparisons with the generosity given to others.

I don't know about you, but I can feel it in my gut. Every time I read this parable, I can feel my heat rising with righteous indignation and I, too, want to know why there is not justice.

Justice, you see, means sharing until everyone is safe. Justice, at its root means that the last will sometimes get to go to the head of the line, Perhaps because they never get to be there, perhaps because their lives are such that their starting point is not the same as those who were ready to work at 8am.

What happens if we stretch ourselves to not identify with the indignant group? What happens to our perception of the parable when we stand in the shoes of those laborers who were picked out of their helplessness and hopelessness at the end of the day? How does the story look from that point of view? It looks like blessing. It looks like dignity. It looks like provision and safety that is unearned and

totally deserved. Deserved not because they earned it, but deserved because the landowner stands with his word, in his own integrity.

All of us have those places in our lives, those parts of our personal journey when we are these late comers to the work in the vineyard. All of us have those places where we don't quite make the cutoff, can't really get up at 8am in the morning to go work in the vineyard of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps it is in our family: try as we might, we can't really get our families to act and be as healthy as we would like. Perhaps it is in our work/kingdom balance: we know that Jesus wants us to act with kingdom values in our jobs, but that doesn't give us the success we need, so we struggle. Perhaps it is in loving others as God loves us. Perhaps it is in loving ourselves as God loves us. Perhaps it is in trusting in God's provision for our daily, earthly needs. Perhaps it is in the area of holding onto grudges, seeking revenge,

denying to operate from the arena of forgiveness. All of us have something, some area like that, some place where we are the 5 o'clock workers, not really able to show up to a full day of work.

We often cannot really admit it fully because when we think about it, we hear not the voice of the generous landowner in our heads and hearts, but, rather the taunting voices of the 8am laborers saying: that one does not deserve a fair wage. That one does not deserve what we deserve. They deserve less. We deserve more.

And we buy it.

This parable is the antidote. This antidote stands the notion of deserving grace on its head. This parable says: God chooses to give mercy and generosity where God chooses. There is sufficient grace and mercy and acceptance and dignity for everyone, in every

area of their lives, in every moment of the day, when they come into the vineyard. There is sufficient grace and mercy and acceptance and dignity for us in every area of our lives, at every moment of the day, when we choose to come into God's vineyard.

Paul, in the letter to the Romans puts it this way: Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus, in the parable puts it this way through the words of the landowner: Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

We belong to God. God has more grace and mercy than we can ever imagine. So when those 8 o'clockers in our hearts and minds begin to taunt and condemn us and tell us that we are not worthy of God's generous mercy,

we can ignore their taunts and imagine ourselves at the waiting place and God arriving at the end of the day and saying: come, come with me. Come into my vineyard.