

Pentecost 14, Proper 20A, 091811
All Saints Episcopal Church

And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us...

Good morning!

Think back a minute about your children, or grandchildren, when they were young. Or if you have none of those, think about when you were a child, and remember three simple words that you probably heard or said more than any other three words in your vocabulary. Can you think of them? I know you might want to say 'I love you', but that is probably wishful thinking!

How about, 'That's not fair!?' Remember? "That's not fair! I was here first!" or "That's not fair! He got more than I did!" or "That's not fair! She hit me first!" It's something we're all born with, this innate sense of fairness. And that's a wonderful thing - not so much when we're young and whiny - but when we mature, this sense of fairness becomes the basis of our thoughts about justice and equality: "It's not fair that some people can vote and others can't; that some people can ride in the front of the bus and others can't; that some are paid more for the same work; that some go to bed hungry while others throw away more than can consume." Yes, we can turn our innate sense of fairness into a strong sense of justice.

We can, but it doesn't always happen. We can tell from our childhood comments that this sense of fairness we are born with tends to be pretty egocentric. That is, our ideas of fairness come in terms of our own wants, our own needs, hopes, expectations, and usually only with secondary regard for the wants and needs of others. And, we don't always grow out of this primary concern for ourselves as we become adults.

So let's look at today's parable.

Day laborers. As real a situation in Mobile today as it was in Jesus' day. People without steady jobs in offices or classrooms or factories or stores have to find some way to support their families and themselves. So they go to the nearest Day Labor storefront (there are a couple between here and the Loop) and they wait for someone to hire them. For the day. Doing whatever the landowner needs to be done. Usually hard work. Hot. Dirty. Long hours. And if they are lucky enough to be

hired - there are always more laborers than jobs to be done - the landowner tells them what they will be paid. No negotiation. No benefits. No pension fund. No sick leave. Only enough to take care of their families' needs for the day.

But there are some who don't get hired. Maybe there aren't enough jobs. Maybe they are sick or too unhealthy to work. Maybe they are just unlucky. But they still wait. All day if necessary. And if they are passed over and over and over, they end up returning home empty-handed to face the disappointed looks of those who depended on them.

So in Jesus' story, everyone gets lucky. Some get chosen at the first opportunity, some more mid-morning, more at noon, at mid-afternoon, and the last just an hour before quitting time. And when the landowner tells the foreman to pay the last hired the same wage as the ones who were hired in the early morning, they, the last hired, must have been ecstatic over what they received! Today, at least, they were going to be able to provide for their families.

But this generosity leads the first hired and the others to expect more for themselves - you can seem them mentally calculating their take for the day. And when they don't receive more, they are disappointed at the very least, maybe even angry. And can you blame them? After all, they have worked hard all day. Wouldn't it be only fair?

When I worked in various Mobile hospitals, there were so many people on staff with so many varieties of jobs and so many different levels of education and training, that it was hospital policy that you didn't discuss pay rates with anyone. But when changes were made in base pay rates, or cost-of-living raises were given across the board (which didn't happen very often, by the way), it was incredible to hear the whining that went on: "That's not fair! We work way more in our department than they do in theirs!" or "That's not fair! The LPNs do all the work. Why do they give the RNs more?" You get the picture.

But the landowner reminds the day laborers that it is totally fair for him to do with his money what he wants to do. He has given everyone what he promised in the beginning; isn't his generosity to the others something that is more than fair? Why can't we - or they- be glad that we are getting paid what we have been promised. Why isn't it enough?

Perhaps along with our innate sense of fairness that can turn into something good, or remain something that is in the end more selfish than not, it is our human nature to define ourselves over and against others, comparing and begrudging their good fortune because it wasn't *our* good fortune.

Look at the day laborers. Instead of feeling fortunate to have found a day's work, they feel unfortunate because they didn't receive more. Instead of rejoicing that these other workers - who waited all day in hopes of the prospect of work - can go home blessed to be able to feed their families, they can only resent them, or even curse them, for their good fortune. Instead of being grateful to the landowner who has given them an honest day's wage for an honest day's work, they can only whine and complain with resentment.

Or perhaps it is the fact that Jesus told this story to illustrate the hardness of heart with which those who deem themselves righteous consider those who by anyone's standards are NOT righteous, resenting the grace and mercy that God offers the unrighteous and the attention given to them by God's son. It's not fair that those who are not good should be made equal with those who are good!

There is another possibility as well. This parable offers us a clear choice: when we look at our lives, do we count our blessings or our misfortunes? Do we pay attention to the areas of plenty in our lives or to what we think we lack? Do we live in gratitude or envy? Do we look to others in solidarity and compassion or see them only as competition? (*David Lose, Working Preacher*) We can't be grateful and jealous at the time. We have to make a choice.

So what will our choice be? Will we choose to be jealous and resentful? Or will we choose to be grateful for what God gives us AND for what God gives others? This is the scandal of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard: that God gives us more than we deserve and that God's kingdom is a kingdom of equals.

Let us give thanks for the One who loves us from the death of scarcity and fear to the new life of abundance, justice and equality. Amen.