

Let me remind you that I don't write these gospels, or even choose them, I just read them. I say that because out of all Jesus' parables, this is the one that I notice makes people the angriest, I believe because it offends our sense of what is fair. If you have ever taught school, especially the younger grades, or raised children, especially more than one of them at once in the same house, you know that even from a young age we human beings have a keen awareness of what is fair. If you and I sit down to tea and there are two cookies on the table, and you eat two cookies and I eat no cookies, I'm going to form an opinion about you. Human nature wants what is fair or, if we are honest, we are fine with an imbalance so long and the excess tips in our favor. But it seems the kingdom of heaven is not always, by our definition, fair.

Jesus tells the parable of a landowner who, early in the morning, agrees to pay laborers in his vineyard the usual daily wage. Later he hires more workers for "whatever is right" and continues hiring all afternoon. At the end of the day the laborers are paid in reverse order, each receiving the same amount. Those hired earlier in the day are angry that they weren't paid more, even though they received exactly what they were promised. The landowner corrects them: they have been paid the agreed upon wage; it is his business what he pays the other workers.

Perhaps because Jesus names the kingdom of heaven as the object of this comparison, the parable has often been read purely in terms of spirituality: someone who comes to faith on their deathbed receives the same heavenly reward as those who work their whole lives to follow Jesus. That interpretation can make people angry enough—especially if we think of the joyful commitment of discipleship as *bearing the burden of the day in the scorching heat*, obeying rules we would otherwise break. But you've heard me say dozens of times that Jesus rarely talks about the kingdom of heaven in terms of the afterlife as opposed to the way we live out God's intentions in *this* life. So what if this parable is not about—or not just about—what God does with us at the end of all things but is about how we as God's disciples are supposed to treat each other now? That'll really make us angry.

About the details, it's worth noting that the *usual daily wage* is estimated to be enough money to supply a family for a little less than a week. It was a livable wage but not excessively generous. Employers were expected to pay according to the custom of the area, and the early workers seem to think the proposed wage is reasonable because they agree to work for it. We don't know why the workers who came later in the day were not hired from the beginning: we don't know if they arrived too late, if they looked less desirable, or if they were initially off working another job; we only know that, by their own description, they weren't working when the landowner meets them because nobody had hired them. They seem capable, because they go into the vineyard and work; and so far as that goes, we don't know if once they got there they worked harder or more efficiently to make up for

having started later. It depends a lot on your personal experience who you identify with here: if you feel like you've been first to work all your life, you might assume that the latecomers in the parable were lazy or lacked ambition. On the other hand, if you've ever applied for dozens of jobs without even getting an interview, you might feel a kindred sense of relief when you read about those later workers finally getting hired—and getting paid a livable wage.

The specific complaint of the first workers is that the landowner “has made them equal to us.” The landowner treated them the same, but they didn't want to be treated equally. They either want more than what they were promised or they want the later workers to receive less than a livable wage. They focus on what is *fair*, or what they perceive as *unfair*. But the landowner in his own words had promised not what was *fair* but what was *right*. In God's kingdom, it seems that those two things are not always the same. If we skip back to our first reading from Exodus, we read that for forty years in the wilderness, when the people didn't plant or tend or harvest or *do* anything to *earn* their daily bread except complain, the Lord provided manna, bread from heaven, enough for one day at a time. It is *right* for God's people to eat at the end of the day; whether or not we think that's fair is immaterial.

As citizens of a modern economy, struggling with proposals like universal healthcare, increased minimum wage, free school lunch, and union strikes across several different industries, we read a story like this and we think, “This is a recipe for disaster! Why would anyone work hard if they're not going to make more money? If the landowner pays everyone the same, nobody will show up until 5 o'clock! The world can't work like this!”

And that is really the point. Jesus isn't describing the way the world works; but Jesus showed up because the way the world works doesn't work very well for a lot of people. God's kingdom works differently because God sees us differently than we see ourselves and each other. Jesus is countercultural, not because he invented anything new, but because he re-centered the vision that God has always had for humanity, a vision our culture obscures: sufficiency, abundance that is shared and not hoarded, a society that works together for the good of everyone, a community where people are valued just for being people and not for what they produce—human *beings*, not human *doings*.

Lutherans are pretty big on being saved by grace; the question is what happens if that grace applies not only to life *after* death but also life *before* death? What if we do the good work of God's kingdom not because deep down we think it will earn us anything extra but purely because it helps people who need help? What if we let go of worrying about what is fair and strive for what God has shown us is right? And if that does change the way the world works, so that more people can actually eat the daily bread for which we pray, shouldn't that make us joyful instead of resentful, envious, or angry? It's not the way the world works; yet may we learn to trust that God's way works better.