

Father may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

There is no question that God cares about economic justice.

The Bible consistently witnesses to God's concern for the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the orphan, the widow, the resident alien. Scripture also has some pretty harsh words for those who trample the poor and vulnerable for their own benefit.

There is no question that God cares about justice. Yet in this parable about the workers in the vineyard, we learn that God does not operate according to our standards of fairness. This parable contradicts so many of our assumptions about the world. In most areas of our lives, we are taught that we get what we deserve. If we follow the rules and work hard, we should get ahead. We should get the good grade, the promotion, or that pay-rise. We should receive recognition for our years of loyal service. Those who are idle or lazy should not expect to receive the same rewards.

We can understand, then, the grumbling of the workers in the parable, the last in line to receive their wages, those who have worked a 12-hour day in the scorching sun. We understand their outrage when they find that those who worked only one hour at the end of the day have been paid the same daily wage as they themselves receive. Something deep within us shouts: It's not fair!

We all know the parables of Jesus are simple stories, set in the context of their time, but with deeper meanings which speak to every generation. If this parable were to be taken as an exercise in labour relations it would be disastrous – strikes, protests, demands for new legislation would follow any suggestion of the same wage for the same tasks, irrespective of working hours.

This story is simple. Men stand in a public place, hoping to find a job for the day; just as in rural 'hiring fairs' in the nineteenth century and the more recent crowds of workers waiting at the docks. The "penny" is the denarius, a small silver coin that was the minimum daily income required to keep a small family fed and housed and clothed and the customary daily wage.

Employers needing workers would typically go to the market place early in the morning, around 6 am, to hire laborers for the day. But what is remarkable about the employer in this parable is that he keeps going back to the market place throughout the day -- at the third hour, at the sixth and ninth hour and even

about the eleventh hour -- and when he sees others standing idle, he offers them work as well. Perhaps he has an especially large harvest of grapes to bring in. Or perhaps he simply cannot bear to see workers standing idle, knowing that they have families to feed.

At the end of the day, around six in the evening, the owner tells his manager to pay the workers in the reverse order of their seniority, "beginning from the last unto the first." The workers at the end of the line, those who have worked all day, are stunned to find out that they are paid exactly the same wage as all the others -- one denarius.

Hearing the workers grumbling, the vineyard owner says to one of them, "Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? "

The vineyard owner blows apart our mentality of "deserving." It is not about what we deserve, or think we deserve, based on what we do or do not put in. The emphasis of the parable is on the generosity of the vineyard owner who pays all labourers what they need to provide for their families, no matter how many hours they have worked.

This is a parable about the kingdom of God. And God, it turns out, is not fair. God does not play by our rules. God does not give us what we deserve. And thank God for that! For if each of us got exactly what we deserved, where would we be? In fact, God lavishes grace and mercy on all of us, no matter how late we have come to the vineyard.

In the parable, each of the workers is dependent upon the landowner, for each of them rolled out of bed that morning unemployed. They owed everything to the vineyard owner who sought them out and gave them work, who gave them a livelihood and a purpose.

Equally, each of us receives our life and purpose and all that sustains it as a gift from God, not as something earned. How easily we forget that, and begin to think that somehow, we deserve all that we have. When we forget that all we have is a gift, we so easily become resentful of God's generosity to others.

Certainly, God cares about fairness in our human economy and market places. God calls us to work for justice, so that all can receive a living wage and daily

bread, so that all can have a roof over their heads. At the same time, God's economy, the economy of the kingdom, goes way beyond fairness. There is nothing to be earned in God's economy. There is only God's generosity freely spent -- on us.

Just as we receive our physical life and all that sustains it as a gift from God, so too our spiritual life. The parable of the vineyard workers is followed by Jesus telling his disciples a third time what lies ahead in Jerusalem -- how he will be mocked and flogged and crucified, and on the third day be raised. There is no fairness or justice here. Certainly, Jesus did not deserve this cruel suffering and death. But the Son of Man came "even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many", so that the abundance of God's mercy would be poured out on us.

The truth we learn from this parable is that God pours out his love and mercy without measure for those who will accept his call. Amazingly, spiritual grace is not measured on an assessment of good and bad deeds, but on dependence and trust, a sincere desire to live our fallible lives according to the faith we have received. In the words of the first Post Communion Prayer in the Prayer Book, we ask God to accept us 'not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences'

Let us pray: Almighty God, whose love and mercy are given without measure to all who truly desire to serve thee, accept our response to thy call, and give us true love for our fellow-servants as we labour together for the coming of thy kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.