

Today's gospel reading, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard always stretches every idea of justice and fairness we have. What do you mean those people who work for just two hours get paid the same as those who worked the whole day? Just how unfair this is reminds me of a test I heard about a few years ago to see if animals had a sense of fairness.

I don't remember the specifics exactly but I believe 40 dogs were chosen all of whom knew the command of "shake." When given the command to shake all dogs would raise their paw to shake hands. The dogs would all do it whether it was their owner who gave the command or someone else. Also, all the dogs would shake for a reward or for no reward. So, to begin the test all the dogs were lined up and told to shake; numerous times. They obeyed, and each time they were given a treat. This test was also repeated without the dogs being given a treat and they all obeyed.

Then the dogs were separated into pairs. Each pair was given the command to shake. Both would raise their paws, the person who gave the command would shake and then give only one dog a treat. After three or four times the dog who wasn't receiving treats typically began to notice. Usually by the sixth

or seventh time they obeyed very grudgingly or not at all. Many times the dog not getting the treat would stop making eye contact. They knew something was wrong. This just wasn't fair. They were okay not getting a reward for obedience. But they weren't okay with another dog getting a reward and they getting nothing.

The whole point of this experiment was to show that the realm of animals has a sense of fairness. The idea of fairness is not unique to humans. And so the parable of the laborers in the vineyard goes against not just human ideas of unfairness, but the whole world's idea of fairness. Doing more work should bring about greater pay or reward.

There is an ancient Jewish parable of the time period Jesus gave this parable where a king pays one worker for a whole day's work even though he only worked one hour. Meanwhile other workers who worked the whole day were paid the same amount. However, when the king is asked why this is so he replies, "Because this man can do more in two hours than the rest of you can do in a whole day." And so, even though no union on the planet would go for such a contract, there is still some sense of fairness.

But not in Jesus' parable. The people who were hired in the

morning were told they would be paid one denarius. That was the typical wage for one day's work. It was enough for a peasant family to buy food for the day. It was not an extravagant wage by any means, but it was considered fair.

Notice in the parable that when the landowner goes out a couple hours later he just says, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." No exact amount is given. He does the same at noon and again at three o'clock. When he goes out again at 5:00 he says, "You also go into the vineyard," and no mention of pay is made at all.

You can imagine what the first laborers hired would have thought when they saw the landowner paying the 5:00 workers a whole denarius. That's a whole day's pay for about two hours of work. They had worked five or six times as long. And so not surprisingly they are shocked and annoyed when they get paid the same.

There are a couple important things to remember. First, the landowner stayed to his word. He promised those hired first that they would be paid a denarius. He didn't short them at all. There was no legal injustice. They had a verbal contract and both parties kept to the terms of the verbal contract. Second, when the landowner is justifying his actions to the laborers our

English translations read, "Or are you envious because I am generous?" A more literal translation from Greek would be, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" You see, the landowner isn't generous in some silly way. He is generous out of goodness. If these laborers didn't work for the day they wouldn't get paid. And if they didn't get paid, how would they buy food for their families? This was a subsistence economy. The common laborer would work all day to buy enough food for he and his family to eat to survive until the next day when he'd go out and work to make enough money for the next day's food. A day without work meant a day without food. And so this landowner is really just ensuring that everyone around has something to eat. This was not extravagant pay. And nowhere does Jesus say why these men were unemployed for much of the day. It probably wasn't for laziness.

Many of you have heard this parable many times, and have heard it preached on many times too. It is typical to say this parable means that those who convert to Christianity on their death beds get to go to heaven just like life-long Christians who slaved away for many years. That is a good and accurate way to interpret this parable. We will all receive the same reward in heaven, no matter how long we've labored in the vineyard. Perhaps it isn't exactly fair by everyone's measure, but it is still God's goodness for all.

The weakness of that interpretation is that we may overlook how *scandalous* it all is. Even dogs would say that such equal pay for unequal work isn't fair. This is a parable about God's grace. Grace is underserved merit. And grace is a real scandal in this world of ours.

I think we'd all agree that the most important things in life are the things we work the hardest at to earn - our education, our homes, our jobs, and the list can go on. In a way the more important something is in life the harder you have to work for it.

But here's the real kicker with grace. The truly most important thing you need for your existence; the most important thing you need for salvation; the most important thing you need for eternal life is not something you can work for. You can't earn it. You can't deserve it. And most of all, you can't control it.

In his book, "What's So Amazing About Grace," Phillip Yancey points out that part of our problem is in the nature of grace itself. It's hard to accept, hard to believe, and hard to receive. Grace shocks us in what it offers. It is truly not of this world. It frightens us with what it does for sinners.

Pastor Brian Bill writes this about grace, "Grace teaches us that God does for others what we would never do for them. We would save the not-so-bad. God starts with prostitutes and then works downward from there. Grace is a gift that costs everything to the giver and nothing to the receiver. It is given to those who don't deserve it, barely recognize it, and hardly appreciate it. That's why God alone gets the glory in your salvation. Jesus did all the work when he died on the cross."

About the only thing that really separates a person from God's grace is if they believe they don't need it. Or, that they somehow deserve it.

Here's the scandalous truth of it all. God loves you. And there's nothing you did to deserve it. Because from this world's perspective with all of its fairness and integrity and honor and all that stuff that people work so desperately hard to have, we are all still ultimately, as Martin Luther would say, "Poor, stinking maggot fodder." That's pretty blunt, but Luther knew how to be blunt. Of what real value are we to God? What can we by our own abilities offer to God that is of any value? Nothing.

We have God's love because he has chosen to love us. I hope you can find that truth inspiring and empowering; scandalous perhaps, but good. Because when you can live that truth you find

that you have been connected to a well of joy and energy that cannot be exhausted. Christian life is joyful. It is living in contentment with God's love. It is living in true security. It is living in grace and being excited by what God is up to through his love. May you be filled with God's gracious love. Amen