

16th Sunday after Pentecost
September 24, 2017
Exodus 16:2-15 / Matthew 20:1-16
The Rev. Carenda Baker

This week some friends and I were discussing today's gospel passage and my friend Mary said, "I remember when I was little girl and would say about something - "That's not fair!" My father would reply, "Fair is where you go to ride the pony and eat cotton candy."

Children want and expect the world to be "fair". How many parents and grandparents - probably some of you sitting here - have struggled with the notion of "fairness" in raising your children and grandchildren? My parents thought it was important to be fair when buying my brother and me birthday and Christmas gifts. Even if they gave us a different quantity of gifts, the monetary value was closely comparable. As my brother and I got older, our parents still carried along this concern about fairness. They owned about an acre lot of undeveloped property next to their home. When my brother was married and he and his wife were looking for a home of their own, what my brother wanted most of all was land where he could build his own home. My parents gifted my brother the undeveloped acre of land they owned. I remember them explaining to me, "We helped pay for you to go to college, and Ted didn't go to college, so we think it's fair to give your brother this piece of land". I was surprised by their explanation. And truthfully, I have to admit that briefly I did a bit of calculating in my head, a little "cost comparison analysis", you know? I'm glad my parents gave that property to my brother. It was theirs to do with as they wanted. Love and the ways it can be shown is an incredible thing. And it will not always seem fair to either its recipients or its onlookers.

We hear another of Jesus' parables today, the story of a landowner who needs to hire laborers for his vineyard. This is not just any vineyard, nor is it a famous vineyard belonging to Ernest and Julio Gallo. This is the "Kingdom of God" Vineyard. The landowner drives out at 6a.m. in his truck to the middle of town where day laborers gather, hoping to be hired for the day. The vineyard owner takes as many laborers as his truck will hold, probably the healthiest and strongest ones. He will pay the usual daily wage, that is, enough to buy food for a man and his family for one day. In a few hours the updated weather report has changed, and a drop in temperature is expected. It is imperative that the work get finished today. Back to the marketplace he goes at 9a.m. to hire more workers. He will pay them whatever is right. Three more times - at 12 noon, 3p.m., and 5p.m., the landowner hires workers for his vineyard. Wages are not even mentioned for the last ones hired. They have to trust that the vineyard owner will pay them some reasonable amount for the hours they work.

At 6p.m. that evening, when the work for the day is completed, the vineyard owner hands the bundle of white envelopes to his manager and tells him to call the workers and pay them, beginning with the last ones hired, and ending with the first.

The laborers who had worked the last hour from 5-6pm, open their envelopes and find a crisp \$100 bill. Wow! This vineyard owner must be incredibly rich! You can hear the murmurs of excitement, the whispering getting louder as word quickly ripples back through the line of workers waiting to be paid. Man, were they lucky to have been hired by this guy! They busily calculate their projected earnings. If those who worked only one hour got \$100, then those who worked 3 hours would get \$300, and some others \$600, and \$900, and praised be God, \$1200 for those who worked a full 12 hour day.

Every single worker tears open his white envelope and finds a crisp \$100 bill inside. No more, no less. Every envelope the same. And then you hear it. The grumbling and complaining grows so loud the sound reaches the landowner. "That's not fair! Those last guys you hired only worked for an hour and you have paid them the same – *"you have made them equal to us who have been out here all day in the sun and scorching heat."*

The vineyard owner says: "I have not treated you unjustly. I paid you the daily wage we agreed upon. . . . *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"*

"Are you envious because I am generous?" The Greek translated literally reads: *"Or is your eye evil because I am good?"* Jesus had taught earlier, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness." The evil eye in the parable is the opposite of the landowner's generosity. The evil eye looks with jealousy, greed, stinginess.

The issue is not so much the amount paid as it is about the fact that the landowner treated all the workers as equals. We're starting to hear more discussion in our country about needing to pay everyone who works a "living wage". Some democratic countries are experimenting with the idea. Nothing lavish. But enough to live on.

Jesus' parable does not sit well with us. We live in a world dominated and driven by comparison, competition, fear and scarcity thinking. But "no joy comes from comparisons". Have you ever noticed this? Rather than being content with what we have or who we are or what we have accomplished, we look around at others to decide what is "enough", based on what they own or have achieved.

As human beings we are generally insecure, so there will always be some external reference point drawing us like a magnet to determine our worth by looking outside ourselves. We enjoy that car we drive; it's dependable and safe, and works fine . . .until we see a neighbor with a newer car that gets better gas mileage and has all those features the older model doesn't have. We are content in our intimate relationships, but wonder if that couple down the street is happier. We love our kids and grandkids, but wish they could be better-rounded or more accomplished, like our best friend's kids and grandkids seem to be. Young people in high school feel good about their grades until they hear about the student who aces everything, scores nearly a perfect 1600 on the college entrance exam.

Or making comparisons from the other direction, we harbor a shallow and superficial sense of pride when we see a mistake someone else has made and we are so grateful we are smarter than that. Or we look at the unhappiness of a friend and we sadly conclude it's their own fault, and thank goodness we make better choices than they do. But no joy comes from comparisons. Only envy, resentment, and bitterness results. Or we try to make ourselves feel better by looking down on others.

We often do identify with those laborers who worked all day and feel taken advantage of. We believe we are "entitled" to certain things, especially if we have lived responsibly, virtuously, and worked hard to get them. Sounds a bit like the "American Dream", doesn't it? If you work hard enough and long enough, you can climb the social ladder, even get out of poverty, become a "self-made" person. Except there is no such thing as a self-made person. Hard work is real. But pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps is not. Social mobility is not nearly so easily achieved as we like to think it is, and are taught to think is possible for anyone in our country if they just work hard enough.

This parable reveals a major assumption in life - that there has to be a "pecking order", someone has to be superior and someone else inferior. This thinking is "the air we breathe" and it so captivates us, to the point that we cannot imagine any other alternative. Jesus tells the parable to startle and invite us as listeners to dream of a different world, to stretch our spiritual imaginations. To try and see the world as God sees it.

What would it be like to stand in the shoes of those in the parable who received unexpected and unmerited generosity? How often are we astonished at the ways God showers us with grace? Do we focus more on what we think we deserve, or do we consider all we've been blessed by that we don't deserve? Do we look at life through the lens of scarcity and lack, or do we look for, name, and give thanks for the blessings and places in which we experience abundance? Do we reflect on what others have and we don't, or do we delight in the wonder of all that we have been given for which there was no guarantee or right to expect? Do we choose comparisons or do we choose joy?

We need to hear it again and again and again, so that we might begin to believe it. There are no winners and losers, no insiders and outsiders, no deserving and undeserving ones in God's kingdom. God's kingdom will offend all of us who assume that the future, if it is to be good, must be earned and deserved. God loves us, not because we are respectable and hardworking, but because God is good. In God's kingdom, all of us hold out our empty hands just like our Thursday morning breakfast guests do, waiting to be served up a heap of God's grace. And lo and behold, God serves us from God's bounty – and it is enough!

At the end of the day, each of those vineyard laborers received just what they needed – enough. For the Israelites in the wilderness, enough came in the form of manna each morning, sustenance received for one day at a time. "Give us this day our daily bread",

we pray, not “give me this day my daily bread”. Enough is something for which to rejoice!

So how can we live into this “God gives enough” thinking? Preaching professor David Lose offers 3 ways to intentionally practice stepping away from making comparisons.

1. The first one sounds simple - Count your blessings. Start each morning by naming in prayer two or three things for which you are grateful. Start your day anchoring yourself in generosity for the actual life you have been given rather than comparing it to some other wish-dream or fantasy.
2. Take a social media Sabbath at least once a week, turning all devices off before bedtime. Social media is driven by inviting us to keep in touch with, check in with and check on how everyone else we know is doing. Connection, which is a good thing, can quickly turn into comparison. Those “selfie” shots can become a cute yet subtle way of bragging, trying to create a self that will impress others. One day a week away from media can help clear and refresh our minds and spirits. Turning devices off before bedtime helps ensure that we won’t go to sleep with comparisons on our minds.
3. This third one is probably the most difficult for us – practice vulnerability. So much of our culture invites us only to show the strong, successful, put-together parts of our lives. Yet each of us has broken places. Each of us has experienced disappointment and loss, as well as moments of fear and hope and joy. The broken and messy parts of us are real, too. Here in this community of faith, of all places, we need to be able to set aside pretending “all is well” and offer our true selves to each other and to God. When we do so, we might find others willing to do the same. It’s very hard to draw comparisons when we are living in the moment, being real with God and each other.

The grace in which we live and move and have our being is an unearned and undeserved gift. Jesus brought God’s grace into the world to transform the world. Jesus’ teaching and healing, his praying, serving, dying and rising were God’s reclaiming of the world.

Imagine that world, because we *are* living in it at this very moment, though not yet completely. Here each week we taste its wine of forgiveness, its bread of release. Here we receive a foretaste of God’s goodness - available to each of us and all of us today, tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that into all eternity. Nothing can compare to a lavishly loving, life redeeming, God of grace who will not be out-given. Friends, today, taste and see the goodness of the Lord. It is enough. It makes us enough. Thanks be to God. Amen.