

Today’s gospel text tells a story of a group of day-laborers. They are hired to work together in the vineyard. But they are hired to work the vineyard at different times. They do the same type of work but when it comes time to be paid, they see each others’ pay checks and some of them are not at all happy. Because whether they were hired in the morning or the late afternoon, the owner of the vineyard gives them the same pay — a denarius — one day’s wage.

This parable confronts all our ideas about fairness. There is no fairness in this story if the laborer multiplies his hours worked by the pay he receives. The owner does not operate out of an economy of fairness, but from an economy built on mercy. I bet there were some folks that didn’t enjoy Jesus’ parable that day. Perhaps some were so turned off by it, that they didn’t listen to him any more.

Often people want a world that is fair and predictable. We have difficulty when we feel vulnerable or taken advantage of. Here Jesus suggests that fairness, getting what one deserves is not the basis of God’s decision-making process. Instead Jesus suggests that a living wage for everyone is God’s choice to make. God’s vision is an economy of mercy regardless of what time of day, whether early in the morning or late in the afternoon, the labor begins. We can imagine that all these day laborers were standing in the marketplace and it was just chance that some were chosen earlier in the day than the others.

The world in which we live is not always fair. In fact, chance plays a role in where we are born and how our lives unfold. It isn’t fair that children in Africa are starving because of drought conditions. It isn’t fair that ocean levels are rising and threatening islands with disappearing all together. It isn’t fair that the wealth gap in our own country creates a society where those already rich get richer and those who are living on the edge are desperate. Those who are wealthy are not only wealthy because they work hard but because of an economy that supports their success. And those living on the edge can not always pull themselves up by their own boot straps no matter how hard they try.

Perhaps the owner of the vineyard knew that if he gave everyone one day’s wage, even to the workers coming late, that that little bit of mercy would provide enough hope for a new start. It was after all, the owners money to give. God’s mercy is not ours to expect because somehow we deserve it, but it’s God’s to give because none of us deserve it. The great King David when presenting the offerings of the people to God says: *“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.”* (I Chron. 29:14)

I didn’t deserve to be born in America. I don’t deserve to have a loving family and a nice home. I didn’t do anything to deserve two healthy children. The world has little or nothing to do with an economy of fairness. But God is all about grace and mercy. Our faithfulness as workers in the vineyard is to reflect God’s mercy.

Marian Wright Edelman reports that *“new data just released by the U.S. Census Bureau reveals 46.2 million poor people in America, the largest number in the last 52 years. One in three of America’s poor were children. Children under five suffered most: one in four infants, toddlers, and preschoolers — 5.5 million — were poor. Children are the poorest age group in our country and getting poorer. To give perspective on America’s shame: The number of poor children is nearly the same as the combined populations of the states of Michigan and Arizona.”*

I remember the summer of 1990 when I was in seminary. I didn't know how I was going to pay summer bills and support my children. Jane Heckles, who worked for the seminary and later became our Conference Minister, nominated me for a little-known scholarship. I interviewed and received \$1500 that helped me through that summer. I remember the desperation I felt and then the gratitude. It gives me much joy to pay it forward today.

Some Bible scholars tie this parable to the early church's difficulty in welcoming late-comers to the kingdom, Gentiles, who were not acceptable in their social order and culture. So for the early church this parable says: don't get in the way of God's mercy extended even to the Gentiles. For the church today it says: "don't get in the way of God's grace given to ALL." It was just as hard for the first Jewish Christians to imagine God's welcome to include Gentiles, as it is today for some Christian communities to welcome people who look differently or love differently than what we've been used to.

Our faithfulness means we reflect God's mercy wherever it is needed. And the need is great. There's plenty of suffering and plenty of opportunity to relieve it. At times it can be overwhelming. I like to remember this wonderful quote of Frederick Buechner. "*The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.*" The teachings of Jesus are very clear. Our souls are not saved by the importance of our jobs, the address where we live, the financial condition we're in, or the color of our skin. These things may determine if our physical lives are saved, but not our souls. We are saved by grace and God's tender mercies, and out of hearts of gratitude we are called to extend that mercy to others.

On my sabbatical Tom and I read again and viewed a movie production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. There is a moving speech about the meaning of mercy in this play:

(*The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, scene 1, lines 182-195)

The quality of mercy is not strained; (mercy cannot be required or forced out but is given freely)
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown. (mercy tempers the power of might, it is more
attractive than a crown of gold and jewels)
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptered sway. (more valuable than a king's power, as represented by
his scepter; mercy has a higher moral power)
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute of God himself,
And earthly power doth then show like God's
When mercy seasons justice.

If we are to strive be godly, then mercy is an attribute for which we must strive. In a world that values power, might, and distorted "fairness", we as people of faith, are to show mercy. May mercy be the lesson for the day.