

“Equal”
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Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA
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Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16

I have a confession to make. For most of my life I’ve resented this parable of the workers in the vineyard. For the same reason I resent people who cut in line. It’s simply not fair. Being someone who works hard and follows the rules, I have a certain sense of what I think is fair. In this parable, in my mind, the landowner is not being fair. No one in his right mind could think that paying the same amount to workers for one hour of work as those who worked from dawn until dusk is fair. Especially if scorching heat is involved. Talk about adding insult to injury!

I’ll never forget complaining about this parable to Deacon Jan about ten years ago. I was grumbling just like the full day laborers, and she couldn’t even understand what the problem was. She invited me to look at it from the point of view of those who came last.

You see, those early workers got exactly what they had been offered. They worked their day’s work and they received their day’s pay. What is unfair about that?

The workers who came late – they received the unexpected generosity of the landowner. They received a full day’s wages. Yes, they got a late start – but they had also been out in the scorching heat, as they waited to be hired. At the end of the day they learned they would be able to provide for their families anyway.

It's pretty amazing that the owner of the vineyard was still looking for workers at that time, and it's pretty amazing that workers were still standing there, long past the time that anyone would be hiring.

Still, from the early workers' viewpoint, it looks like a bunch of lazy bums who only worked an hour got a full day's pay. I couldn't help seeing their point.

What I had never noticed until yesterday was what the early workers say. They don't say, "Hey, you must be bad at math because those latecomers got the same amount we did." They don't make a suggestion, "How about giving us some extra since we've been here all day." What they say is, "You have made them equal to us."

"You have made them equal to us." And we don't want that.

Think about it. If there were workers still waiting to be hired at 5:00 in the afternoon, who might they have been? Most likely people that nobody else wanted. Perhaps people who were disabled, weak, elderly. Maybe someone who'd committed a crime or had a bad reputation. Maybe foreigners who nobody knew. Those who most needed a little kindness and generosity.

The landowner paid everyone a day's wage, made it possible for each one to provide for his family. The only ones who had agreed to an amount were the ones he hired at dawn, the ones most able to do the full day's work. Everyone else he said he would pay what was right. They all got what they needed. They all got enough.

So, let's backtrack for a moment to the story from Exodus. The ancient Israelites have followed Moses into the wilderness where they've been journeying for about a month and a half. They're hungry, and in their hunger, they find themselves longing for the good old days back in Egypt where, even though they were enslaved, they had good food to eat. So, they complain, who wouldn't, – and God hears their complaints.

God provides them with manna, a flaky white substance they turn into bread, and with quail for meat. God hears their complaining and gives them what they need. Enough food for each day. They have instructions – only gather enough for a day and then on the day before the Sabbath gather enough for two days. Don't leave any out over night as more will be provided the next day.

As the story goes on, some gather more than enough and others gather less, but when they measure, each has the same amount. Some hoard theirs and leave it over night, but in the morning, it's foul and has worms. God provides exactly what they need when they need it.

We hear again and again in scripture how God provides what God's people need. And, I might add, in God's good timing.

Why then is it so hard for us to trust that God will provide enough?

That in God's mind we are all equal.

That in God's economy everyone gets what they need, not what they earn or deserve.

It can be hard to hear that the kingdom of heaven is like that landowner. Where those who come late are treated just the same as those who came at the beginning. Especially if you're someone like me who tends to identify with the early workers. Like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, those of us who resent others for what God chooses to give them miss out on the party.

If instead we think of the undeserved grace, the unexpected generosity to the prodigal son or to those workers who only worked an hour and recognize that the same grace will be extended to us when we need it, well, like the grinch, our resentment may fade and our hearts may grow bigger.

Imagine you are one of those needing extra generosity.

Imagine a time when you were one of them.

Imagine a time when someone extended undeserved grace or unexpected generosity to you.

Maybe someone paid for something you needed – like the time an anonymous parishioner paid my entire fee so that I could enter the Ordination Exploration Program.

Maybe someone extended forgiveness, like John Lewis did to Edwin Wilson, the man who had beaten him so badly 48 years before.

Maybe someone gave you a second chance you knew you didn't deserve.

Maybe you've extended that grace or generosity to someone else and gave them what they needed.

My friends, the kingdom of heaven is a place with no room for resentment.

Everyone there has enough. Everyone there is equal. There is plenty of room for all who want to come.