

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
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On the surface, a story Jesus told about some workers and their wages appears to be full of unfairness. However, it turns out that beneath the surface there is a more profound truth about God and a truth about what it means for us to be created in the image of God.

At end of the day, all the workers lined up to be paid. Those who had only worked an hour came to the desk first and, to their surprise, the stewards gave them a full day's wage. When those hired in the afternoon, at noon, and in mid-morning came, they too were given a full day's pay. The last to arrive were the first ones hired – the ones who worked the entire day. They were paid a day's wage, exactly the amount the vineyard owner promised when he hired them early that morning.

When they saw what they were paid in comparison to the latecomers, they protested. They said to the owner, "You have not been fair. We have worked twelve hours and some of these people have only worked one hour and you have paid us the same amount." After hearing their complaint, the vineyard owner made two responses. First, he said, "I have done nothing unjust. We agreed at beginning of the day that I would pay you a full day's wage and I have kept my promise." Second, he said, "Are you begrudging me my generosity with the others who came to help?"

The second response is the key to understanding this parable. We humans are inclined to look at life through the lens of justice. And justice is an important thing. In the baptismal covenant, we promise to strive for justice and peace among all persons. But justice is not the *main* thing. In the gospel, Jesus challenges us to look at life through the lens of generosity. This difference in viewpoints is as old as creation itself. Regardless of when we arrived, how did any of us come to be here in the first place?

God's purpose in creation was not to *get* something, but to *give* something. Bountiful, abundant, extravagant, limitless generosity is the source of creation. Because of that generosity, none of us can claim that our existence is the result of our own effort. Life is a gift. We are not born because we deserve it. God's grace is given to us not because we are worthy, but because God is good. Life is not really, fundamentally about justice or fairness. It is about grace and generosity. We humans are the creatures that have the unique vocation to be stewards of that grace. That is why Christians can be grateful in all circumstances.

Those workers who were hired early in the morning had reason to rejoice throughout the day. Perhaps they did. But at the end of the day, when they received what they were promised, when they received something they did not have when they were waiting for work in the marketplace, they began to compare their bounty with what the others were paid. Their joy turned to resentment.

That same thing can happen to each one of us. If you want *define* yourself in terms of what you have: your looks, your treasures, your intellect, and then *compare* yourself with what other people have, you will always find someone who has more than you do. You can then be indignant and say life is not fair. If you compare yourself to others, there is always going to be somebody to envy.

We don't have to let that happen. When your joy is being displaced by envy, try this little exercise. Compare your present circumstances with what you had one year before your birth. Birth itself is a windfall. Life is a gift. That awareness causes us to look to something more profound than justice for our perspective on existence. It is the secret to understanding what it means to be created in the image of the Creator. It is the key to growing gracious and generous hearts. It determines how we pursue our vocation to be faithful stewards of God's bounty.

There is an old rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons.* When they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and taught them everything he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he grew too old to work, the boys took over the chores of the farm and when the father died, they had found their working together so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. So each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had corporately produced. Across the years the elder brother never married. The younger brother did marry and had eight children. Years later, when they were having a wonderful harvest, the bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He needs more of this harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. During the night when he is asleep, I'll take some of what I have in my barn and I'll take it over to his barn to help him feed his children."

At the very time, the younger brother was thinking to himself, "God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn't been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He's much too fair. He'll never renegotiate. I know what I'll do. During the night when he is asleep, I'll take some of what I have in my barn and I'll take it over to his barn." And so one night when the moon was full those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. The old rabbi said that there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God was weeping for joy because two of his children got the point. Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy and because we are made in God's image, our generosity is the secret to our joy. Life is not fair. There is more to life than justice and fairness. There's grace! There's love divine that is the foundation of the universe. Life's not fair because it is rooted in the generosity of God.

* Thanks to the late John Claypool for this rabbinic parable.