

“Once upon a time there was a very wealthy wine maker, who not only fermented aged and bottled the wine, but had his own massive vineyards to boot. He used labor from a common pool and paid them by the hour. Unfortunately, the vineyard owner tended to underestimate the number of workers needed, so several times during the day he went back to the labor pool and hired on more. His policy was to pay at the end of the workday; so at sundown, he paid off the help. However for reasons known but to God and the owner, he paid each worker the same – not the same hourly amount but the same total amount, an action guaranteed to miff those who put in the longer days.” So might a modern story teller retell our Lord's parable of the vineyard owner.

Jesus went on to say that, when the vineyard owner heard the whining, he told those complaining that he had treated them fairly. He paid them what he promised, the owner said, and as for paying those who joined the workforce later the same amount as those who worked all day, well it was his money after all, and he could do what he wanted with what was his.

I don't remember when I first read or heard this parable, but I do know I was young and went to a church that really taught the Bible. I remember that I took the story literally and thought that Jesus was really unfair. I also remember that my Sunday school teacher, a biblical literalist that was more than a little fundamental in his thinking, would not allow me to question the Lord's wisdom because to do so was surely a sin.

I struggled with this as a child and I think many people struggle with it still. Where was Jesus coming from in his treatment of the laborers? Why should those who worked an hour get the same pay as those who worked all day? Or put to its higher level of meaning, which is what the parable is all about, why should those who turn to God late in life get the same reward as those who have been servants of God throughout their lives? That is what the parable is asking and explaining.

The answer is simple: that is just the way God is. God loves us in spite of our inadequacies, in spite of our shortcomings. And God values each of us simply because we are his children, his creation. It does not matter whether we have been raised in the Church or come to Christ on our deathbeds. There are no degrees of salvation. Salvation is not merit based; it is graced based, and God gives freely and equally to those who love him, acknowledge their sins and seek his forgiveness. The reward is everlasting life.

It's so easy to buy into a theological reward and punishment system and in doing so fall deeply into the trap of jealousy and anger. The jealousy is especially insidious when it causes us to measure Christian worth based on earthly measures. The jealousy becomes, indeed, a mortal sin, not because God withholds grace from us, but because in our jealousy we block out the experience of grace. Jealously causes us to see others as objects, not as people, and ultimately it causes us to see God as an unfair object, unfair because he is not dancing to our drum beat. So God, himself, becomes the recipient of our rage.

This parable of the vineyard is not a parable about what is fair from our perspective. It is a parable about life in the Kingdom of God. The parables of the Gospels always point to the Kingdom of God and tell us what the Kingdom of God is all about. In this case, the parable is telling us that all who turn to Jesus will be included in the Kingdom. It does not matter how late it is on life's clock; if you turn to Jesus that is enough.

Who is worthy of God's gift of salvation? The answer is that none of us are worthy, yet even in our human brokenness, even in our unworthiness, God comes to us in Jesus, God comes to us through the Cross, and cleanses us with the Blood of Jesus Christ. *Amen.*