

Year A, Ordinary Time, 25th Sunday

This is a frustrating gospel. If we're honest with ourselves, it really does strike us as unfair how the first and the last laborers are treated. Jesus's addressed this parable to his disciples, and they probably thought it was pretty unfair too, so before we look at how this applies to us, let's look at how it applied to the disciples.

The setup for the parable is really familiar imagery to the Jews. The image of Israel as a vineyard is a common Old Testament image for the way God cares for his chosen people. But here, Jesus is preparing his apostles for the Church that's he's working to establish. All of his apostles are Jewish, and Jews of the day understood themselves to be the heirs of God's promises. The problem was, they usually understood themselves to be the only inheritors of God's promises. But Jesus, since he's God and all, knows that God wants to include everyone in this promise. Now, the promise is the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Kingdom of Heaven is the Church, the means by which we get to heaven. So, Jesus is prepping his disciples to build a Church that includes everyone, so in this story, those workers who bore the days burden and heat are usually understood to be the Jews, and the workers who show up at the end are the gentiles, who get the same reward as the Jews even though they only said yes to God's promises at the last minute.

For ourselves, we often think of ourselves as those who have born the day's burden and heat, because after all, we're the faithful Christians, we're here every Sunday, and we're pretty alright. Those who become Christians late in life are like the workers who went to work at noon, and deathbed conversion stories are like those who showed up at 5 pm for just one hour of work. Same heaven as the rest of us, and all they had to do was repent at the very end of their lives.

So, I wanted to check and make sure that we're all bearing the days burden and the days heat. So if you could help me out for a minute (don't worry, I almost never do audience participation). Could you please raise your hand if you've ever told a lie? That's everyone? Have you ever stolen? Even stolen time through laziness or failed to pay back a favor? Keep your hand up. And if you've ever looked at another person lustfully, just keep your hand up. If not, you can put your hand down. Because Jesus says that's adultery. Have you ever been angry with someone? Then keep your hand up. Jesus assigns that the same punishment as murder. And keep your hand up if you've ever let anything get in the way of your relationship with God. That's idolatry.

So, by your own admission, this is a parish filled with liars, thieves, adulterers, murderers, and idol worshippers. Now, in case someone wants to get mad and say that Father accused us all of being this that and the other thing, hang on one minute. I didn't say that *you* are liars, thieves, adulterers, murderers, and idol worshippers. I said that *we* are. I think the bishop assigned me here because he knew I'd be in good company.

Let's bring this back around. When we recognize the depth of our sinfulness, we realize that really we are not "bearing the day's burden and heat," and really we're not even showing up at 5 o'clock for an hour of work, we're more like the workers who hold a shovel just to look good, but mostly use it for something to lean on. Then we start to understand that the vineyard owner's unfair generosity is actually a really good thing for us. I really don't want God to treat me fairly, because fair to me, when I consider all my sins, would be a really bad thing.

So when we hear stories demonstrating how unfair God is, it should make us really happy because we realize that his unfairness works in our favor. Fairness is exactly what we don't want. Fairness gives us what we deserve. Fairness leaves us dead in our sins. But unfairness gives us Jesus. Unfairness is a God who loves us so much that he sent his son to redeem us. Unfairness is a merciful Savior instead of only a just judge.

This might even push us beyond notions of fairness in our dealings with each other. Because fair is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. If you hit me I hit you back. But forgiveness offers another option. Forgiveness is essentially unfair, because it involves letting go of the anger and the hurt that I have a legitimate right to. Forgiveness is what God offers us, and so it's what we must offer to each other. So focus on forgiveness, not fairness, in your dealings with one another, because forgiveness, not fairness, is how God deals with us.