

Grace-Onomics
Matthew 20:1-16
October 19, 2008

Did you ever have a classmate who didn't really need to study for exams, while you spent days cramming in order to comprehend and appropriately regurgitate the information? It didn't seem fair. Perhaps you have a friend who can eat anything and never gain a pound, while just looking at a piece of pie goes to your waistline. It's not fair. Perhaps you've been a loyal employee of a company for years, always trusting that they would treat you well, but now it has gone bankrupt, taking your hard-earned pension with it. Life is not fair.

Jesus tells the story of the day laborers hired to work in the vineyard. It is harvest season and the landowner needs to harvest the grapes in a timely fashion before they spoil. Early in the morning he hires some workers who agree to work for the usual daily wage, even though it only provides for subsistence living. The owner returns to contract additional laborers throughout the day, promising to pay them "what is right," without specifying the amount. Workers are hired at 6 a.m., 9 a.m., at 12 noon, and at 3 p.m. Even at 5 p.m., just an hour before the close of the day, the owner goes out to hire more laborers.

The Jewish law ensures that day laborers be paid before sunset. As the workday comes to an end, the owner distributes the earnings. First he pays those who worked only an hour, paying them a denarius, the full day's wage. They get more than they expected. Those who started work at 3 p.m. and at noon get the same amount – more than they expected for half a day's worth of work or less. Those who started work early in the morning may be hopeful that their longer hours of work will be rewarded with additional pay. They, too, may get more than they expected from this generous landowner. But the owner upholds his original agreement. Even those who worked twelve hours are paid a denarius, the same as the pay offered to those who worked only one hour. We hear the anger of the early workers. "This isn't fair. We're going to take this up with the Labor Relations Board. Why should we not tolerate this kind of treatment?"

The vineyard owner responds, "Friends, I have done you no wrong. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Matthew's story of the Laborers in the Vineyard has also been called the Story of the Generous Employer. Jesus is trying to show us the astonishing, incalculable, undeserved abundance of God's love for all God's children. Jesus knows it will rile us and set us on edge. For you see, we humans live by calculations and measuring sticks. We are afraid if someone else gets more, we'll get less. If we see someone else prospering, we feel we've been cheated out of something. Parents often have to navigate the perilous waters of sibling rivalry: "His piece is bigger. She got more cookies. But I wanted that toy!" God must become exasperated by all our "pity parties."

We forget that everything is a gift from God. It really isn't ours to dole out stingily after all. That's why the vineyard owner asks, "Am I not free to do with what I have as I want or are you begrudging me my generosity?" Where did we get our lives, our talents, our resources? Our lives began with the gracious gift of God. God so delighted in life that God wanted to share it. I can imagine God saying, "The wonder of aliveness is too magnificent to keep to myself. I want others to know the ecstasy of being and of having and of doing."

And so God began to create not to get something for God's self but to give something of God's self. Bottomless generosity is the source out of which all creation comes. The truth is that

none of us can claim that we have earned this existence of ours by our own efforts. Each one of us is given life as a gift. Our very birth is a windfall, coming into the possession of something that is not ours by deserving, but something precious that is given to us. If we stay in touch with that primal grace that marks the beginning of all our lives, then the truth is that we have reason to be grateful no matter what our particular circumstances. We no longer think in terms of justice because life is not fair; rather it is rooted in grace. The sheer wonder of aliveness itself is an unending source of joy and of gratitude.

Those early workers had a choice about their response to life. They could have stayed in touch with the primal grace that had surrounded them when they were first hired, the gratitude that they would be able to feed their families that night. The problem arose when their focus shifted from that primal grace and they began the side-long glance of comparing. They looked at what others got instead of what they had received. When they began to compare, the side-long glance of envy turned the joy of the morning into curdled resentment at the end of the day.

The same thing can happen to each one of us. If we look at life in terms of the particularities of what we have – the kind of body, financial resources, intellectual capacities – and then compare ourselves with what other people have, we will always find people who have more or different than we do, and we can be resentful. We can say that life is not fair. If we compare ourselves to others, there is always going to be somebody that seems to have a better life.

John Claypool suggests a formula for living life in joy. Compare your particular situation at this moment with what you had a year before you were born. I was born January 23, 1959. January 23, 1958, Lori Best Sawdon did not exist. I had no body. I had no being. I had no more way of making myself a living entity than those day laborers had ways to make work. When I stay in touch with the fact that my very birth is sheer windfall, that my life has been given to me as an incredible gift, then something deeper than justice becomes the way that I look at this whole mystery of existence. If we keep in touch with the truth that life is gift and birth is windfall, we can be generous with our lives exactly as God has been generous with God's grace.¹

There is an old rabbinic story about a farmer who had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and taught them about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm. When the father died, they found working together so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership.

Each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest season, they equally divided what they corporately produced. Over 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 old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of his harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the middle of the night when he is sleeping, I'll take some of what I have in my barn and slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children."

At the very time he was thinking this, 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. In the middle of the night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over into his barn."

And so one night when the moon was full, as you may have already anticipated, these two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. The old rabbi said that although there wasn't a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God weeping for joy because two of his children had gotten the point. Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy. Because we are made in God's image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well.

Life is not fair, thank God! It's not fair because it's rooted in grace.

ⁱ John Claypool, "Life Isn't Fair, Thank God!" January 30, 2000, www.csec.org.