

Proper 20-A
Sept. 23-24, 2017
St. John's Cathedral

One of the things I often said to my children when they were teenagers and whining about the unfairness of life, was "Life is not fair." I probably said it way too often. At least that's what they told me. It gives me a little bit of parental pleasure to see that they now also say this to their teenagers.

We certainly have a keen sense of justice in some areas of life. A primary one is who deserves to receive what -- or what is fair compensation.

That's what today's gospel from Matthew is about -- at least on the surface. As we've moved through Matthew this year, we've discovered that parables are really stories about God. Stories that often get under our skin. Stories that can open our hearts. And today's is no exception.

A landowner goes to town one morning to hire some people to work on his land and comes home early with some workers who agree to the usual daily wage--roughly what it took to feed a family for a day. They get to work. The landowner goes to town again at mid-morning and at noon and gets more workers. Then he goes again in the afternoon and one more time just an hour or so before quitting time and puts even more people to work. So far, so good.

As I read this, I remembered seeing workers every day standing near a roundabout in the Zocalo -- the huge central plaza of Mexico City. They would hold signs that said 'plumber' or 'carpenter' or laborer. Sometimes a car or truck would stop, negotiations would begin and a worker was hired. That scene also plays out in

many American communities, often the parking lot of a store like Home Depot. This is the life of a day worker in many places.

The landowner in today's parable hired a crew and put them to work, but when quitting time came, he paid the people who worked only an hour exactly the same amount that he paid the ones who have worked all day – a full day's wage. That does not go over well with the people who worked in the hot sun all day. It is not fair, they argue.

But he argues back. I can do what I want to with my own money, he says. I can be as generous as I want to. Are you jealous because I am generous? he asks.

Are you jealous? Jealous of someone who seemingly got a better deal? One that he did not earn? In *the Message*, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this gospel reading, the landowner asks, "Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?"

Whatever it is, they are simply ticked off. Life is not fair.

If we are really honest about the economy of fairness in our culture, we know that hard work pays off. We're raised like that – at least I was. My parents, who grew up during the depression, and neither of whom came from a family with much money, were great work ethic people. You get compensated for your hard work. The more you work, the more you are paid. This was simply conventional wisdom.

But this parable isn't so much about our conventional wisdom or conventional views about workplace fairness. It is really more about the economy of God. The generosity of God. Notice that this parable begins with the words, "The Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner..."

We could look at this and say that in the economy of God the landowner is generous in order to meet the basic needs of the workers – even the ones who worked less. Every worker could feed the family that day. The landowner is seeing the bigger picture of how each person has not only needs, but worth as a person.

In God's economy, sometimes we call that grace. Grace is God's love and God's favor that we receive without earning or deserving it. In God's sight we all have worth. We don't conjure up grace by our hard work. We receive it simply by accepting it. Money cannot buy grace. It comes simply from God's love and goodness.

But despite this, our vision is not always that clear. Sometimes we are jealous or crabby about what others have. Sometimes we are critical when someone receives something that doesn't appear to be earned properly. I'll never forget an afternoon, while standing in a grocery store checkout line, when I heard a store clerk and a customer have a loud, critical conversation about a woman who had just paid for a nice cut of meat with food stamps.

These days we are asking hard questions about who deserves to get basic needs met. Housing. Food. Health care. What is fair?

And beyond that, why, I wonder, are some of the most generous people in my life the ones who have the least to share? Is that really fair?

Or is it yet another reminder that no matter who we are or what we have, in God's economy we are both valued and loved and also called to a new kind of generosity that reflects the grace that we cannot earn, but which blesses our lives.