

In today's Gospel lesson, it is clear that The Kingdom of Heaven needs to be unionized. Otherwise how can its practice of work and wages be brought into line with modern business principles? If you work more hours, you earn more money, rise in pay level and in company position. It's what we expect. But it is not the system at work in this parable of Jesus.

In ancient Palestine there was a huge pool of people who did not own land or have a trade that brought income. Instead, the poor came early in the morning to the town square where managers would arrive to hire workers for simple, hard, day labor. When they bargained for 'the usual daily wage' we are talking about one denarius – just barely enough for food for one day for a small family. This is why they were paid at the end of their ten hour shift. They desperately needed today's earnings today.

So, if you were in charge of hiring for the vineyard, who would you hire first? It would be the healthiest looking, those who seemed most fit, best able to work their fingers to the bone. In this parable, the one who hires is not a foreman, but the owner of the vineyard. And, as would be quite unusual, he returned every three hours and hired another batch of those without work. He kept this up until the last hour of the day, when he scooped up the dregs of those who still needed a job. By that time, his choices would be down to the infirm, the elderly, those with handicaps. It's hard to see what production he hoped to get from that group.

Come the end of the day, all were paid for their work, starting with that last feeble group. Surprisingly, they were given the full daily wage of one denarius. As the news of this largesse made its way through the group, those who had been there all day began to entertain hopes of much more money for their labor. But no, they too were given one denarius. Any of you who have raised, or worked with children know what comes next – the universal cry built into our DNA: ‘That’s not fair’. Which, of course, it isn’t.

Being experienced readers of parables, we know that the landowner represents God, and the payment received is entry into the Kingdom of God. But if God is the one doing this unfair thing, how do we understand it? Is God not just?

To look at this more closely, we need to go back and read carefully what the ten hour workers said. ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ There is the heart of the complaint, the real problem. “You have made them equal to us.”

As Dr. Matthew Skinner of Luther Seminary says, “It’s not the generosity or the extravagance [of the owner] that makes them angry. Rather, the issue is this: By dealing generously with a group of people that no other manager in town considered worth the trouble of hiring, the landowner has made a clear declaration about their value, their worth. The landowner’s undue kindness thus denies

the full-day laborers the bonus they think they can claim: a sense of privilege or superiority.” This idea should be familiar to us who live in a country structured on supposed merit and the rules of capitalism. It lies at the heart of our racism and resistance to any change.

Perhaps a university admits more minority students, trying to have a more balanced campus community. This will bring lawsuits that argue, “These people who got preferential admission (ie people of color) did more poorly on standardized tests and intangibles like community service; yet you have made them equal to us.” Of course the usual admission criteria are structured for those who grew up with wealthier school systems, who could afford time to serve in the community. It is a form of White privilege that we are all quite good at not seeing.

This month, Target Corporation has stated that they intend to promote or hire more people of color into management ranks. And I can just hear the grumbling: “I came into this job with a better education, and I’ve worked here longer than that woman. Yet are you can making her equal to me.” The reality is that for decades people were promoted because their skin color and the style of their speech and dress were more familiar and comfortable for those choosing who should advance in the ranks. Now the larger organization has need for a more representative management, and that grinds on our racist assumptions.

Ivy and I have a sign on our lawn that you, too, may very well have put out: Black Lives Matter.” One can often tell who is most bothered by these lawn declarations. They will counter with signs or statements saying, “All Lives Matter.” At one level this is true. But the difference is that White people have always known that their lives are worthy of respect from the forces of government and law enforcement. Extending that to Black people is the jarring, if subconscious, change for the White population. You are trying to make them equal to us.

We need to remember that Jesus is describing here the structure of the Kingdom of God. When the disciples came to Jesus asking what their reward would be in heaven, since they had left home and family to tramp all over the countryside following the master. Will they receive the honor of sitting at the right hand of the Lord in the resurrection, special renown in the Kingdom? Jesus replies that all who have come with him will receive more than they gave up. Does that mean they will receive more than anyone else? If there were justice....

But truly the Kingdom is built less on justice and more on love, much less on good works and deeply on relationship. The only prize of the Kingdom, waiting for all, is to be joined eternally to the presence of the God who calls each one beloved. There are no second-place finishers. The person who repents and reaches out from death row is equally called home. The beggars who could not be philanthropists will be received into the riches of

God's eternity. Prostitutes and petty thieves, as well as regular people doing their best, all who want God will receive God, even those who don't know that this is what they long for. It is the generosity of grace.

We're not sure we want this. We would rather be in control of earning God's love. But it turns out that this love is only available as pure gift. I have a magnet on my refrigerator that says, "Most people need more love than they deserve." And we can have that love, if we don't mind that it makes us equal to everyone else. For God will fill our cup to the overflowing, so that we, and all, can drink deeply.