

September 21, 2014

[Exodus 16:2-15](#) and [Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45](#) (or [Jonah 3:10-4:11](#) and [Psalm 145:1-8](#)); [Philippians 1:21-30](#); [Matthew 20:1-16](#)

How long have you been a member of this church? Or are you a first-timer? Look around. How long do you think those sitting near you have been members of this church? Somewhere in the crowd is someone who has been here the longest. And somewhere is someone who has been a member for the shortest amount of time. Those of you in small churches know these people almost instinctively.

Do you think those who have been members longer should have more benefits? More access to pastoral care? More influence with the vestry? Be first in line for pot-luck suppers?

Of course these are absurd questions. But what if they were not? Wouldn't that cause us to understand better the sense of outrage expressed by the longer-serving laborers in today's gospel story who saw their treatment as a matter of unfairness?

Can we fail to feel sympathy for those who worked the longest? These hired hands labored harder and longer and got the same pay. How can we not feel a painful sense of injustice?

Living in community, we inevitably have experiences that allow us to identify with the workers in today's gospel story, even if the situations were not as serious as economic and social injustice. We may well remember parents who gave up a great deal of time and energy coaching youth sports leagues or teaching Sunday School or leading scout troops, helping children of other able parents who did not volunteer to do their fair share.

How many of us with siblings recall growing up feelings we had to do more than others in the family? How many first-borns eventually complain that their parents let younger brothers and sisters have more liberty than they had at the same age? Isn't it true that one of the first things we learn in life is to develop a view of what seems fair and what does not?

But as mature Christians, one of the first things we learn from today's gospel reading is that Jesus didn't care much about fairness or unfairness in the way we tend to think about it. He was not concerned about the ethics of business or labor management relations or who got to what place first. Through the story in today's gospel, Jesus turns our normal views upside down, shaking them out, so we can more clearly see the truth of God's values. He challenges our religious assumptions, affirming a radical understanding of God and our relationship with God that upsets our conventional theological views and the tenets of popular psychology.

Jesus succeeds in shocking us out of our common misunderstandings of God, by affirming a deeper insight into the character and purposes of God. He wants to shake us out of our usual self-understanding by opening us to a deeper awareness of ourselves, and to transform us more into the image of God.

Jesus wants us to experience this parable as a way to learn what lies beyond viewing the events as simply unfair or fair and to catch a glimpse of the utter limitless generosity of God. He wants us to understand that the worth of human beings is not measured by how much we earn in pay or how well we perform or by any of our usual measures – status, popularity, social achievement, productivity, wealth, physical appearance.

Jesus wants us to know that our worth as human beings is absolutely affirmed by God, who guarantees our value as human beings – not because of anything we have done or can do – but because of God's creative and life-affirming love for us. Jesus wants us to know that in the face of our limited, worldly understanding of what is fair and what is unfair, God works with a different reality, in a different direction, and by different standards.

God gives us chances to realize our potential – each in our unique way, restricted, of course, by our own limitations, but empowered by our individual talents and gifts.

Jesus wants us to know the overwhelming reality of God's love in this world. Jesus especially wants us to recognize the power and presence of God in the life of each and every one of us. Jesus wants us to know that God calls us to respond positively to what he has given us. He wants us to work in his vineyard with happy hearts and willing bodies.

Jesus wants us to know that working and serving in God's world is a great privilege and opportunity. The reward for our service is the joy of knowing that we are part of a great adventure that gives meaning to our lives. The reward for serving others is found in knowing that we are part of a Christian process of laboring to leave the world a little better than when we entered it.

In telling this parable of the laborers in the vineyard – the ones who worked different amounts for the same pay – Jesus wants us to know that God would have us concentrate on our own spiritual condition, not spending time and energy considering everybody else's spiritual condition, and to accept our ultimate worth and our ultimate purpose without comparing our contributions to those of others.

Today we have heard Jesus turn one of our normal, worldly views upside down. In so doing, according to our faith, he actually places those values right-side up. Today's parable teaches that life is from God's point of view, not a matter of fairness or unfairness. It is not a matter of deserving or undeserving.

Through today's parable, Jesus reminds us that whatever we have is, after all, a gift from God. Whatever we have is more than we deserve. God is overwhelmingly generous. It is enough that we have the profound privilege of laboring and serving in God's vineyard.

— *The Rev. Ken Kesselus, author of "[John E. Hines: Granite on Fire](#)" (Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, 1995), is retired from full-time, active ministry and lives with his wife in his native home, Bastrop, Texas.*