

A mother was driving with her 3 young children one warm summer evening when a woman in the convertible ahead of them stood up and waved. She was stark naked! As the mother reeled from the shock, her 5-year-old from the back seat said, "Mom, that lady is not wearing a seat belt!"

On the first day of school, a first-grader handed his teacher a note from his mother. The note read: "The opinions expressed by this child are not necessarily those of his parents."

A woman was trying hard to get the ketchup out of the jar. During her struggle the phone rang so she asked her 4-year-old daughter to answer the phone. "Mommy can't come to the phone to talk right now. She's hitting the bottle."

OK, let's admit it up front. We all HATE this parable. Let's dig in and see what's going on. Just prior to this passage, Matthew tells of a rich young man who was invited to follow Jesus, but did not, because he had "many possessions." (Mt 19:16-22) But Peter, once again speaking for all of us, says "We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (19:27) WHY should we be disciples of Christ? What's the payoff? Jesus assures Peter "Everyone who has given up home, brothers or sister, father or mother, wife or children or property for my sake will receive many times as much and inherit everlasting life." (19:29)

Yet there is something in Peter's comparative attitude and his need for the assurance of reward that does not fit well with laboring in the Lord's vineyard. This story tries to point out the problem and correct it.

It's an unrealistic social story – but it communicates a basic spiritual truth about each person's relationship to God. God is like a landowner seeking people to work on the home estate. People are like day laborers. Socially, day laborers are a vulnerable group. They do not have a permanent standing with a single employer but are dependent everyday on a call. This reflects the spiritual condition of us before God. We have no claims on God but each day God calls us to work in the world.

The agreement is: if we work for God day by day, God sustains us day by day. This is symbolized by the fact that the compensation is 'the usual daily wage,' what is necessary to sustain life in the present. The workers are not given enough for the next day. If we were, we might envision a life outside of continual divine support. See why we hate this gospel? We want security, savings accounts, ROTH's, and stocks. We don't want to be dependent on anyone – not even God.

We see this reflected in the Lord's prayer. We are to pray for our "DAILY bread" (Mt 6:11). God does not give more and God does not give less. The economic acts of saving and hoarding give us the delusion that we are self-sufficient, capable of living outside of God's love and help. This is how many people in our society understand themselves – we've saved up and we don't really need God. But we are invited to do GOD'S work in HIS vineyard.

Of course there is grumbling when all who worked receive the same "usual daily wage." And this is what drives us crazy. What the landowner has done is make all people who work in his vineyard equal, regardless of how long they have worked. The landowner gives to all the same. And we want an explanation! The bestowal of 'daily bread' is not correlated to the amount of work done. It flows out of the nature of God as good and gracious. The landowner told them that he would pay them what is just. What is just for the

landowner is always ‘the usual daily wage.’ This is what people need in order to work in the vineyard, and this is what is always given.

But our notions of what we think is fair take over. So when the first-hired laborers see the last-hired receiving the same as themselves without putting in the same time and effort, they grumble. They are not happy with what they had actually agreed on.

But this unhappiness will be used by the landowner to force them into self-examination. They cannot argue with what the landowner says. They have not been treated unjustly, and the landowner is free to act according to personal choice. Therefore, the last question, “Are you envious because I am generous?” – literally “Is your eye evil because I am good?” The goodness of God causes them to be envious. (adapted from Shea, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN, p. 279-283)

OK, so what? A lot of corporations forbid the comparing of salaries because it is a volatile activity. Chances are it will lead to charges of unfairness, a sense of being discriminated against, a decline in employee morale, and like the Gospel, an epidemic of grumbling. Now none of US ever does this of course, but we may have heard of it in OTHER companies or churches! But even if the employer explains WHY there are discrepancies in wages, the grumbling will persist. No reason is good enough when we sense someone got something that we did not.

That is why this parable is probably the most disliked parable of the Gospels. Its unfairness is so overwhelming it edges out that other egregious Gospel – a welcome and a feast for a son who squandered his inheritance – the Prodigal Son. Even though the owner of the vineyard’s argument is beyond refutation – “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” – it makes no headway against our outrage. There is a deep sense of unfairness. And we, who are always quick to feel offended, identify with the weary, heat-beaten first laborers.

This feeling of unfairness springs from a well-constructed mental tape that we pretty much all play in our heads. Its basic message is: “If someone gets what I am getting but hasn’t put in as much work as I have, I am being cheated. Is there any other way to see this?” Most of us have this tape running constantly. This makes us, in the language of the parable, grumble-ready.

The truth of this tape seems obvious because it confirms our fundamental stance. WE ARE THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE – and we evaluate everything that happens from the point of view of our own well-being. If it protects or promotes us, we praise it. If it makes us vulnerable or demotes us, we grumble: “You have made them equal to us to have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” OUTRAGEOUS!

This gets played out in highway construction zones on a daily basis. We know how it goes. We are the good and dutiful persons who move over to the left lane when told to do so. We slowly take our place in line – and then there’s always those beloved brothers and sisters of ours who go flying to the front of the line and squeeze in. And we all feel just great about it – don’t we?! We just murmur a little prayer saying “Ah, bless those sweet sweet souls!”

Third, it all has to do with our point of view. Is it kingdom consciousness – or comparative consciousness? FROM THE LORD OF THE VINEYARD’S POINT OF VIEW, what really matters is not what we get but that we work in the vineyard. A larger reality permeates our physical, mental, and social life and calls us to join in the harvesting of a new human reality. And the owner is shameless in the diversity of ways He calls people to work in His vineyard. What is paramount is the work.

Once in the vineyard we are in the owner's domain, and the rules change because of who the owner is – and what the owner is about. THE WORK ITSELF IS THE REWARD! The joy is in the contribution, in the privilege of joining with the Lord of the Vineyard in the creation of the world. Remember, we are supposed to be in a consciousness called the kingdom of heaven and not in a consciousness that could be called “comparative status” or “Fear of Not Getting What We Deserve.” We do not need to worry and look out for ourselves for the One for whom we work knows what we need and is only too willing to supply it (Mt 6:8, 32-33)

We begin to value the full heat of the day because we know we get to do more. We no longer live in the envious world of comparison – but in the abundant world of God's goodness. In this world God's goodness gives us a good eye. This eye in turn, works and flows like liquid light, each effort a response to grace, each effort releasing grace, mercy and love.

The Lord of the Vineyard has no choice. God has to give us all that God has. Which, of course, is one day's wage. An abundance that we could never have even asked for – or even imagined. AMEN. (Shea, Op.Cit., p. 283-285)