

**Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Sept. 21, 2014)**

It's Just Not Fair!

It's not fair! It's just not fair!

Can't you just hear those people in the parable: those who had worked all day would receive the same pay as those who had worked for just one hour. It's not fair, they said. And wouldn't you be tempted to say the same thing in the same circumstances?

After all, our sense of justice, like theirs, says that those who do more work should receive more pay. Well that's not always observed in our own economy either. But we have to remember that this is a parable and so we should expect surprises – and in this case the surprises are as evident to us as they were to the people who first heard the story. Then, too, Jesus says it is about the Kingdom of God – and that, too, should make us realize that things will be different.

Jesus obviously means the owner of the vineyard to represent God who tells the complaining workers he has done them no injustice since they received the wages they agreed on. Even in terms of first century economics this made sense. It should to us as well. But then Jesus adds those mysterious words, “Are you envious because I am good and generous?” The story is not about justice as we ordinarily understand it. If you will, the story is about God's justice which is different from ours. God's justice is expansive and generous. Ours tends to be narrowly focused and selfish.

Remember now that Jesus' parables usually have meanings on several different levels. So let's reflect some more upon what else this parable might mean

First of all who are these people that are hired at the end of the day. The story says they were there all day but no one hired them. Why not? Well those who were hired at the first hour were clearly the most able-bodied, the strongest, who obviously could do the heavy duty work. As the day went on, less qualified workers were hired until at the end of the day, the only ones left were the weakest, the least qualified to be able to do the

kind of work the owner wanted. And consequently they were the poorest. Jesus reminds us that God has special concern for the weakest among us, and that they are as welcome in the Kingdom as anyone else. Indeed special concern must be shown them simply because it is so difficult for them to manage on their own.

Then there is the amount of pay that was agreed upon at the beginning of the day: the usual daily wage. The experts tell us that this is the sum of money needed to keep a family in food and clothing for one day. And it was considered a just wage. If those who only worked one hour received less than that they would not have been able to support their families. They were obviously living in poverty already. The owner of the vineyard, standing for God, lets us know that this is not right. Jesus is here giving us a lesson in social justice – although he would not have called it that. For him it was simply the obligation we owe one another by virtue of the fact that we are all children of the same God. The application to our own times in terms of a just and living wage is obvious, and I will not spend time elaborating on it. But again this is food for thought and prayer.

There is one other point that occurs to me. Some might say that those who only worked for one hour did not deserve what they received. Well I like to think that we have all come at the last hour, and God generously gives us the Kingdom even though we do not deserve it. The Kingdom is God's gift to us and there is nothing we can do no matter how long or how hard we work to deserve it. So what does that mean? That we don't have to do anything? Well we all know that is not true. The fact is God loves us all very, very much and lavishes blessings upon us. For our part we must do our best to love God back by doing what God asks us to do, especially as that is spelled out for us by Jesus in the Gospels.

In our first reading today, Isaiah, the prophet, urges us to "Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call on him while he is near." Everything our Scriptures tell us is that God is always near, and that God may be found everywhere and in all things, especially in all people. Not a bad thing to remind ourselves of. It would be good to get into the habit of asking ourselves several times a day, "How is God near to me right now?" How may God be found? And then call on God while God is near.