

Ordinary A 25 September 20, 2026 St. Michael's Greenwich
“That’s not fair.”

Isn’t that your immediate reaction?

“I don’t care if Jesus said it or not, it’s not fair.”

Instinctively we side with the grumblers.

But strictly speaking, the owner has acted justly.

Even the grumbling workers received what they had contracted for, so the owner can rightly say, “I am doing you no wrong.” He is acting justly to the day-long workers, and generously to the rest.

In fact, the complaint of the grumbling workers is, “You have made them equal to us.” They are not so much angered by what the owner has done to them as they are envious of the good fortune, the blessing, bestowed upon the other workers.

They are so enclosed in their understanding of justice that it becomes a norm by which they become judges of others. They want to order the world by their norms which limit the Master’s freedom and so exclude unexpected generosity.

The final words of the owner, which get translated as, “Do you begrudge my generosity?” are, literally, “Is your eye evil because I am good?”

Scholar John Donahue notes that in Matthew’s gospel, “the eye is the lamp of the body,” and “if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” These servants have allowed their attitude to “darken” their whole way of viewing the world. What began as an act of justice to them and unfolded as an act of generosity to others blinded them to the goodness of the owner and the good fortune of others. (Donahue, The Gospel In Parable)

If our own eyes are not so blinded, what might we see that the workers in the parable missed? Or maybe, what do we miss that the Lord sees?

The owner pays out a daily living wage; the workers get what they need to feed their families and cover their other costs for that day. If he only paid by the hour worked, those who come late would be left short. Their families would go hungry, and perhaps homeless, and that, for the owner, would be a far greater injustice, a far greater tragedy, than the bruised feelings of the all-day workers.

Jesus is being deliberately provocative, in order to get us to challenge our own simplistic and misleading pictures of God, and our own self-serving definitions of justice. Jesus wants to help us see that God gives us what we need, not what we deserve.

For this parable is not about Jesus debating Pharisees over welcoming tax collectors and sinners; nor is it just about Gentile believers entering the Matthew's Jewish Christian church. It is about us.

We good, pious people---after all we are the ones going to church today---we good folks tend to look on ourselves as the workers who bear the heat and burdens of the day.

And there is some truth to that.

Many brothers and sisters no longer walk with us, while we are at mass faithfully, week after week, keeping the doors open and the lights on and the ministries vital.

And perhaps some secretly resent God for showing mercy to those who pursue the most outrageous lifestyles or spew the greatest bitterness at the Church.

But in truth, we are not so different from those other folks.

If we haven't committed those same sins—and some here no doubt have!—we've committed others. And maybe that's worse in our case, because, after all, we know better.

Anthony DeMello, the late Indian Jesuit, once remarked that both saints and sinners are about the same distance from the sun. “Does it really lessen the distance if you live on top of a skyscraper?”

All of us are like the workers who get hired at the last hour; and the Lord takes pity on us, and sees our desperate need, and repays us not according to our merits but according to his mercy.

For we are all sinners. All of us.

The late Pope Francis, when asked to describe himself said, “....I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner.”

Think back on the Ten Commandments---Any of us here kept them all? I see no hands up.

And if someone did raise their hand, that would be a violation of the eighth commandment, about not lying!

Yet, as Pope Francis also said, “Although the life of a person is in a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God.”

The true sign that mercy and forgiveness have begun to reshape us, the true sign that we have passed from being hirelings and employees to being children of the Father, is when we rejoice in His extending that mercy; when we are glad to render generous service to the world, without regard to measuring relative rewards.

If God’s thoughts become our thoughts, and God’s ways become our own, then God’s vision of His world will be ours too, and our focus will be on the needs of one another, rather than the jealousies and drives and clutchings of our own hearts.

A fitting meditation on this weekend of our Ministries Fair.

Let me conclude with a story.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like two brothers who lived joyful, contented lives, until they both received a call from God to discipleship.

The older brother responded to the call generously, though he had to wrench his heart from his family and the girl he loved and had dreamed of marrying. Eventually he went off to a distant land, where he spent himself in the service of the poorest of the poor.

A persecution arose in that country and he was arrested, falsely accused, tortured and put to death.

And the Lord said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You gave me a thousand talents worth of service. I shall now give you a billion, billion talents worth of reward. Enter into the joy of your Lord.”

The younger boy’s response to the call was less than generous. He decided to ignore it and go ahead and marry the girl he loved. He enjoyed a happy married life. His business prospered and he became famous and rich. Occasionally he would give alms to a beggar or do an act of kindness to his wife and children. Occasionally, too, he would send a small sum of money to his older brother in the distant land.

“It might help you in your work for those poor wretches there,” he would write to him.

And when it was the younger brother's turn to die, the Lord said to him---

Anybody want to guess?

The Lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have given me ten talents worth of service. I shall now give you a billion, billion talents worth of reward. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

Now the older brother was surprised when he heard that his younger brother was to get the same reward as he. And he was delighted. He said, "Lord, knowing this as I do, if I were to be born and live my life again, I would still do exactly what I did for You."

We are gathered again to share the Body and Blood of the Lord, given for us, given freely as our daily bread for our everlasting need.

We pray with gratitude that God has chosen us to labor with his Son;

gratitude that God looks only at what we need, not what we deserve;

gratitude that He provides all we require for eternal life with him;

gratitude that God stirs in us a desire to be generous to Him as God is to us.

With St. Ignatius of Loyola we pray,
Lord Jesus, teach me to be generous.
Teach me to serve you as you deserve,
To give and not to count the cost,
To fight and not to heed the wounds,
To toil and not to seek for rest,
To labor and not to seek reward,
Except that of knowing that I do your will.
And the people of God said, Amen.

Children's version

That was a hard story to understand, even for adults.

So let me tell you another one, that might help us learn what Jesus was saying.

A dad had three children, two boys and a girl. It was almost Christmas time, and he wondered what gift to get each kid.

Of course he wanted to be fair. He didn't want any of them complaining that Dad was playing favorites by giving one of them a bigger gift than he gave the other two.

He didn't want them ever to have a reason to brag, "I'd dad's favorite," or to complain "Dad always liked you best."

No, he loved each child equally and wanted them always to know that.

Now, of course, some days he liked one of them a bit less than the others; actually, that's not quite correct. Some days he didn't like how one or the other behaved. But he always loved each of them, and watched over them with joy, and forgave each child even when they were grumpy.

So, that Christmas, at first, dad thought, I'll get them each the same thing; that way no one will feel short-changed; no one will say, "You like him best," or "You like her best," because "they got a better present than I did."

No, dad always made sure they each got an equal amount of dessert, and always did their fair share of jobs around the house.

But this Christmas, dad wanted to do more than simply be fair.

He loved each child, not just equally, but uniquely. There was something special about each child that dad treasured. He didn't compare them to each other; he loved them each absolutely, and he wanted to give them, not presents that cost about the same, but give them gifts that celebrated how special each one was.

His older son loved baseball and was a starter on his Little League team. Dad got him a new bat, a new glove and a new baseball.

His daughter loved art, drawing and painting. Dad got her new brushes and oil paints, an easel and some canvases.

His younger son loved music and had taught himself how to play some simple tunes on their piano. Dad found a piano teacher for him and also signed him up for lessons about how to read music.

I'm not sure if he spent more money on one of them than he did on the other two. But this wasn't about making sure each kid got an equal piece of cake or each kid got a gift that was equal to what the other kids got.

Dad always made sure that each kid got what they most needed: lots of love and hugs and kisses, a safe home and good food, and a good example of how to grow up to be generous and courageous and compassionate.

The Christmas gifts were extra; and dad gave each child what that child most needed, at that time, to flourish.

Like that dad, Jesus always gives us everything we really need: absolute love, open arms to welcome and bless us.

But Jesus also gives us gifts that make each of us special.

Instead of comparing ourselves to someone else, Jesus invites us to say thank you for the gifts we do have, and to be happy for our friends and family members for the gifts Jesus has given them.

Let me conclude with a story. Your parents might understand this better at first, but it'll give them and you something to talk about at home.

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We are grateful to God for all the ways God blesses us and blesses everyone else. We are grateful that God has chosen us to be God’s beloved children. We are grateful that God calls us to be generous as God is to us.

That’s a lot to talk about on this Sunday morning.

In a moment, after the Creed and prayers of the faithful, we will bless your catechists, and then those in levels 1 and 2 as of last spring will go with their catechist to the back. At the end of mass, levels 3, 4 and 5 will go into the back and the parents will remain here with me and Fr. Murphy.

But right now, I’m going to treat you the way Jesus treats children: He loves them and embraces them with tender care, and then He gives them back to their parents.

So please return to your parents.