

Well, I suppose it was just, but it doesn't seem very fair. Not only was it not very fair but it was kind of dumb. I'm talking about the landowner in Jesus' parable this morning.

Surely he had the right to pay the workers the same amount no matter how long they had worked. But it is entirely understandable that the workers who had toiled all day would be incensed when those who had only worked an hour were paid the same amount.

The landowner could have avoided the whole scene by paying the workers who had been working all day first. They would then be off on their merry way, and may have never known what the landowner had paid the others.

It's a curious story, and one that, I suppose, speaks to all of us. We have all felt slighted by someone, at some time, I am sure, but today's story is a parable. Jesus begins the story by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like..."; a very clear sign that he's not really speaking about labor relations. He's speaking about much more.

The climax of the story is not in the peculiar pay scale. It is not in the objections of those who felt slighted. Unfortunately, the climax, and point of the story, is somewhat lost in our English translation. It comes when the landowner answers the objections of the workers with a piercing question.

He says, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

But a better translation of this question would be along the lines of, "Do you give me the evil eye because I am generous?"

The landowner's accusation against the workers is powerful. It is as powerful as the workers' objections. This exchange was very tense.

Envy is an incredible emotion. It is poisonous, and deadly, and this was particularly so in Jesus' time, and culture. Envy, in Jesus' day, was not just the dynamic of wanting something akin to what another person had. It was wanting exactly what another had, the actual thing; not something similar, or like it but the thing itself.

This meant that when you were envious you were actually wishing for the destruction, or death of another person so that you could have that person's property.

The landowner asks the workers, "Do you want to kill me because I am generous? Are you that sick, that deadly?"

This is not just a mere story about economics. It is a story about how we live our lives, and the power of generosity, and greed.

In Jesus' day, the average person, people like you and me, had little, or no sense of God's abundance. They believed that there was only a limited amount of goods in the world, and when someone benefitted, someone else suffered. Whatever extra you had caused the lack of what I had.

I suppose this is understandable enough. When you grow up in a desert, where there are more rocks than trees, or more sand than soil, it would be very hard to believe in abundance.

But in that sense, we are nothing like the people of Jesus' day. We live in a land of plenty. We have McDonald's, and Starbucks, and groceries stores at every turn. Even our national identity speaks of abundance. We sing proudly, and patriotically of amber waves of grain, and the fruited plain. But today's parable still strikes home.

Generosity, I believe, is a cardinal virtue of the spiritual life. Jesus has taught us this. He has taught us of God's generosity. This is a revolutionary idea. It is just as revolutionary today as it was when he first spoke this parable. I believe generosity is eternally revolutionary because it is part of our nature to worry, to hoard, to seek to protect our futures.

But Jesus has called us to a generous life; a life that shares freely with others. Jesus has called us to a life of stewardship, not ownership.

Jesus has called us to a life that recognizes that all things belong to God, we only have use of them; and it is our great gift, and responsibility to use them in godly, wise, and generous ways.

All that we have is a gift from God. Our life is a gift from God. The world in which we live, our sustenance, our salvation is a gift from God.

Generosity is itself a gift from God. Generosity teaches us that we do live in a world of blessings, and abundance. It gives us the chance to experience the liberation from holding so tightly the things of this world. It brings us closer to the heart of God, and of God's children.

Sure, the landowner's actions would have frustrated me, too. But his question is more valuable than anything he could have paid his workers. In his words we find a deep, and abiding challenge. Are we people of envy? Are we people of fear, and worry, or are we people of grace, and generosity?