

It's Not Fair!

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Who here has never heard a child whine, "But it's not fair!"? I have a friend who always responded to her children that she hadn't gotten her fair share either. I admit that the first thought whenever this parable comes around, I struggle even though I know that God is infinitely generous.

There seems to be consensus that the landowner in this parable is God and the center of the story is God's generosity.

However, rather than a story about God's generosity, perhaps Jesus is inviting the disciples – and more than 2000 years later – us, to look at ourselves. But there is so much more. Think about the laborers; they had just worked a full day in the hot sun and the last workers are getting paid first. Not only that, but they are also receiving the full day's wage.

Ah, I bet he will pay us double! In the end that doesn't happen. So, I had to wait and got nothing extra for it.

Equal payment to all the workers appears to be generous and a gesture of equality among the workers. But is that really generous? Not only were many of them worn out from a day of toiling in the sun; those who worked all day had to wait longer for their pay. What was the landowner really doing? Was he trying to foster division among the workers? When a worker called him on the lack of fairness or justice, the landowner answered him, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ***Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?*** Or are you envious because I am generous?"

The landowner is powerful and seems God-like; he declares his own goodness and justice. However, at the end of the day the workers are all as

vulnerable and powerless as they were at the beginning of the day. They have lost their dignity, and most likely unity with their colleagues. The injustices are intensified. The ancient economy was dependent on limitless day-laborers; disposable fuel—bodies to be burned up. Our world now is full of such bodies, who make our clothes, produce our food, and assemble our electronics, yet never get off the treadmill. Has the landowner instilled envy among the laborers?

Dorothy Sayers wrote, “Envy is the great leveler; if it cannot level things up, it will level them down....At its best, envy is climber and a snob; at its worst it is a destroyer – rather than have anyone happier than itself, it will see us all miserable together.”

Diana Butler Bass points out that envy caused the first murder in the world is the the Cain and Abel story. “The last’s offering is accepted before that of the first brother.” Just as the first laborers had to wait receiving their wages last. Envy drives us to have more, to take what we think we deserve, to beat others at the game. Envy isn’t just a personal sin. It is one of shared consequences, a communal deadly sin.

In 2022 the National Institutes of Health discovered that “people who are high in malicious envy tend to engage in more environmentally harmful activities rather than living a sustainable life.” Envy contributes to climate change!

We need to heal our broken world, we need to heed Jesus’ call, “...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” Saint Paul wrote that “Love does not envy.” Diana invites us to dwell on love and in love. Practicing love rearranges the heart.

To begin, instead of dwelling on whether the landowner is purposefully inciting envy, we are called to consider a different narrative and practice gratitude. And practice love. We often say that God is love, we believe that, and certainly I do, it is imperative to practice love to heal our world.

Poetry often says it better. So I will close with this offering from Steve Garnaas-Holmes. Feel free to close your eyes and let the words seep into your hearts.

Quid Pro Quo

There is no such thing as deserving. None.

No one is owed anything.

One's work, behavior, virtue or sin is irrelevant.

God loves each of us the same—infininitely—
according to God's love, not our "deserving."

God is free from our past:

God's love isn't determined by what we've done.

The devil wants you to fear

that God doesn't really forgive, doesn't just plain love,

but demands some kind of transaction,

some making up for something,

some reward or punishment, some quid pro quo.

This is how Satan gets us to eat the fruit of the Tree

of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Oh, how smart we are.

Jesus will have none of it.

He rips at our secure place in the caste system

(not up with the saints but higher than *those* people...).

And he rips at our assuming to measure.

And our assuming (how handy for us!)

we are owed more than others.

Listen: Everybody gets God's love, everybody the same.

Listen to your heart when I say that.

Everybody gets God's love just the same. Everybody.

Even you know who.

What in you wants to say, "But...."?

Is that God's voice.. or something else?

Why do you fight against the infinity of God's love?

What is the fear, the hurt you hang onto?

What if you were to let go, and let God love?

What if there is no deserving, but only giving and receiving?

What if you are one of those who is given

way more than you earned?

Will you fuss... or just say thanks?

Amen!