

An old “Family Circus” comic strip shows the two boys Jeff and Billy squabbling over the size of the slices of pie their mom has placed before them. “They aren’t the same,” Jeff pouts. Mom tries again, evening-up the slices. Still Jeff is upset. “They still aren’t the same!” he whines. This time Mom uses a ruler and absolutely proves that both slices of pie are the exact same size. “But Mom,” Jeff complains, **“I want mine to be just like Billy’s . . . only bigger!”**

We all tend to think we deserve a bigger slice of the pie. **From the time we are little children, we are taught that DOING MORE IS WORTH MORE.**

Did you get an allowance as a child, that weekly “reward” for doing the chores that were your responsibility? If so, you probably had your allowance and the amount of work you did to “earn” that allowance go up as your age did. Right?

If a five-year-old gets a dollar for picking up their toys and clothes;

If an eight-year-old gets five dollars for feeding the dog, emptying the garbage, and vacuuming the living room;

Then a twelve-year-old should get considerably more for mowing the lawn, doing some laundry, watching younger siblings, and cleaning the garage.

Chores and allowances teach children that in this world’s economy we have to do work in order to receive our “rewards.”

We want our kids to learn and to live the MOTTO: “Hard work pays off.”

That is why the parable in today’s gospel text is so unsettling. It is easy to identify with the grumbling guys who worked sunup to sundown, through the heat of the day, and then watched in amazement as some slackers who worked for one measly hour, in the cool of the approaching evening no less, got paid a full day’s wage. Of course the full day worker EXPECTS more. Of course the full day worker SHOULD get more. It is only FAIR. *More work should equal more wages. ” Hard work pays off.”*

But it doesn’t. Not in Jesus’ story of the kingdom. Instead those who worked 6 am to 6pm got the same dusty denarius that the 5pm-6pm workers got. How is that fair? It’s not. But Jesus’ parable is not about the human category of “fairness.” It is about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom that is wholly under God’s rule. And **GOD IS NOT ‘FAIR.’**

Thank God! God is not fair. The God who rules heaven and earth is the **God OF JUSTICE AND MERCY,** not the **God of “FAIRNESS AND EQUALITY.”**

In the hands of the God of justice we know that we never need doubt God’s word, or be at the impulsive whims of some all-powerful deity. An unflinching God of justice was a far cry from the scheming, dreaming, self-absorbed, moody gods and goddesses of the pagan pantheon that ruled in the first century. **But a strong/brave God of justice leaves all of us still in “the marketplace,” still out of work, out of luck, and outside the vineyard that is God’s kingdom, at the “eleventh hour.”** YES, our life-training in the “equality”

of human economics leads us to identify with those who labored in the vineyard all day long and cried “foul” when generosity got bestowed BY THE OWNER on the late-comers. **The truth is we should be identifying with those marketplace mopes still hanging out without hope at 5pm.**

Fallen humanity has no place to go at the close of the day.

The “selection” of workers in Jesus’ parable is as unpredictable as life itself. **Although we may proudly assert that all people are born equal, there is no denying that we are not all equally born.** Some of us are born into money and comfort, but many more of us are not. Some of us are born with the grace and strength of athletes, but many of us are not. Some of us are born with physical disabilities that make every day a championship challenge. Some of us have intellects that stretch and soar, but many of us do not. Some of us have minds with holes and hurts. Some of us get “picked” on that first round through the marketplace, but many of us do not. **In fact, any one of us may suddenly find ourselves alone and unclaimed at some eleventh hour of our lives.**

That is why we are all eleventh hour people. Grateful for the enduring promises and presence of a **JUST GOD.** But dependent upon the compassion and generosity of a **MERCIFUL GOD.**

MERCY is a uniquely Christian “virtue.” Neither the Greeks nor the Romans saw “mercifulness” as a quality worthy of “virtue” status. And while God’s mercy was poured out upon Israel countless times, the rules of the Torah tempered and tethered the extent of merciful actions Judaism acknowledged.

In Christianity, in the presence of Christ’s sacrifice, in the shadow of the cross, mercy became not a weakness, not an exceptional event. MERCY BECAME A STRENGTH AND A SIGNPOST. The word which we translate as “sin” is hamartia. It literally means “missing the mark.” Anyone here hit bulls-eyes every time? How many of us score a direct hit every time? If you miss the mark, mercy is not an option. Mercy is an imperative.

GOD IS JUST & GOD IS MERCIFUL. Both qualities define the all powerful, the absolute, nature of God.

There is the story of a woman who sat for a portrait painting of herself. When the artist finally completed his work and showed it to her, the woman was upset. She did not like what she saw. **The artist defended the accuracy of his work by declaring to the woman that everyone he had showed the portrait to had said THAT IT DID HER JUSTICE.** The woman retorted, “I’m not looking for justice. I’m looking for mercy.”

In Jesus’ own “eleventh hour” IT WAS MERCY THAT REIGNED. And it still angers us. As Jesus hung on the cross, despite the LOSS OF HIS DISCIPLES, he still had companions. On either side of him, suffering on their own crosses, two convicted thieves were Jesus’ Golgotha neighbors.

One taunted and dismissed him. But the other admitted he was getting what he deserved. In contrition he asked Jesus to **“remember me when you come into your kingdom”** (Luke 23:42). Jesus promised that crucified criminal, that “eleventh hour” convert, **“today you will be with me in Paradise”** (Luke 23:43).

The last human being to speak with the earthly Jesus was a convicted criminal. *Why should a thief be offered this “get out of jail free” card? Why should an executed criminal get a carte blanc clean slate, at the last possible moment?*

Jesus' Golgotha roommate is the poster boy for “**death-bed confessions.**” And yet Jesus extends to this man the fullness of God's MERCY. Jesus promises this crucified thief, this last-hour-faith-follower (a “hanger-on” if there ever was one!), **that he would be the FIRST to enter into Paradise with him.**

The eleventh hour laborers, the thief on the cross, the Prodigal Son who deserved nothing yet received the fatted calf, a golden ring, and his father's love. They are all examples of God's kingdom.

They are all testimonies to the strength and power of God's JUSTICE and God's MERCY.

****JUST LIKE THE EXAMPLE IN THIS VIDEO...**

- YES, The God who rules heaven and earth **IS A GOD OF JUSTICE AND A GOD OF MERCY!**
- HE IS NOT WORRIED ABOUT WHO IS **FIRST AND WHO IS LAST...**
- HIS MAIN CONCERN IS ABOUT HIS LABORERS AND WHO MAKES IT “INTO” THE VINEYARD

Have you made it into God's Vineyard: And if not, will you make it on time??

Amen.