

We've all heard it, often from a parent or guardian, the dreaded put-down to some great wailing complaint: "Life isn't fair."

This truism, so true despite its overuse, has lived on in my head encapsulated by the pithy response from an old Calvin and Hobbes comic: "I know life isn't fair, but why is it never unfair in my favor?"

This is of course how we all respond to the unfairness of life, first as children and then as adults. Part of growing up is learning to accept that life is indeed not fair but also to recognize just how frequently it really is unfair in our favor - in ways both tangible and intangible.

Yes, I woke up sick that morning, missed the bus and didn't get that job I wanted—but I live in a stable society, woke up in my own bed, and continued to apply for jobs from inside a comfortably air conditioned coffee shop.

The cycle of fair vs unfair runs in circles like a dog chasing its tail, never landing anywhere with any satisfaction. The cosmic imbalance of fair vs. unfair is something we humans just learn to live with in order to get by.

And we must recognize that behind our cries of "Not fair! Not fair!"--no matter how we might try to cloak them in altruism—lie a deep and abiding concern for our own welfare, our own sense of what we are owed by the world at large. The challenge of seeking justice in an unjust world is to discern when our sense of fairness is seeing the world as we want to see it or going deeper to see the world how God sees it.

In today's parable Jesus once again takes us down the path of what the kingdom of heaven is truly like. And as always, the economics of the parable make no sense. From an earthly perspective everything about how the vineyard owner goes about securing workers seems absurd. First he doesn't hire enough workers - then he doesn't seem to pay a fair wage to the people who worked in the fields all day.

But of course the economics of the kingdom of heaven turn the values of this world on its head. For one thing, there is no finite amount of labor involved here. The work is ever expanding.

The work in the vineyard just can't seem to get done. The landowner needs more laborers. And so he keeps going back, again and again, to hire more workers. Until at the very end of the day, he finds still more of them waiting around to be hired.

"Why are you here?" he asks, surprised.

"Because no one has hired us."

These aren't people who showed up late to the marketplace and missed all the employers. They've been standing there all day and no one has hired them. Jesus doesn't tell us exactly why, but our imaginations can fill in the gaps. Maybe some of them are scarred or injured by previous work accidents, not as able to do the same amount of work as the others. Maybe they aren't liked in their community—they have a criminal record, they don't have the right papers. Whatever the reason, these are the outsiders, the ones nobody wants to hire. Until the landowner sends them into the vineyard.

And so perhaps there's something else going on when the other workers are offended to see them paid the same wage. Yes, there's the primal unfairness of seeing someone who only worked an hour paid the same as those who worked all day. But also... those people? Really? He hired them? Surely that was as a last resort. Surely he sees that we are better than them. He's throwing them a bone out of the kindness of his heart, but he'll pay us even more. We've been here all day!

Those first laborers—the good and the capable, the ones picked first, the ones everyone assumes will make it—reject the radical nature of the kingdom of God. They are operating under the worldly assumptions of scarcity rather than the divine promise of abundance. And by refusing to be on the same level as those chosen last, they also reject what is truly offered beyond their daily pay:

A relationship with the landowner.

You see, the landowner in the parable isn't just looking for some hired hands to work through the day. If that were the case he'd be delegating. A man with that kind of money—enough to pay

an ever-expanding pool of workers—probably has plenty of flunkies and middle-managers to take care of the labor situation for him.

“We need more workers!” I can imagine him snapping at an underling. “Hurry, go get me more! We’re burning sunshine!”

But no. Again and again he goes into the marketplace to hire his workers directly. Because this is not someone who is just looking for bodies to work his fields. He goes to these people, meets them where they are and draws them into the vineyard. Even those outcasts, the last ones chosen, are given the dignity of being hired face-to-face.

And by laboring together in the vineyard all of the workers—the ones picked first, the ones picked at midday, and especially those chosen last—have the opportunity to work side by side, to know each other and to form a new kind of community.

This is what the kingdom of heaven is: not a chance to get our just deserts, to get what is fairly ours at the expense of the less deserving, but an invitation back into paradise, back into a loving relationship with God.

And mending our relationship with God means mending our relationship with our fellow created human beings. This mending begins when we truly recognize the dignity of every human being—especially those we are most inclined to dismiss or reject.

Our reading from the Old Testament gives us another story of relationship, this time in Jonah’s refusal to accept that God might truly have mercy on the city of Ninevah.

Like those laborers lingering on the margins of the marketplace, the people of Ninevah are outsiders. But unlike those laborers we know that they have done something to set themselves beyond the pale. Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, the violent empire that oppressed the people of Israel time and time again.

Jonah has good reason to hate that city. He tells God as much: “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

By running away at the start, Jonah hoped to avoid this very outcome. The Ninevites might truly repent and worm their way out of getting their just deserts—God being too merciful and all. But Jonah’s hard-heartedness and desire to see a city full of hundreds of thousands of people destroyed sours his relationship with God.

The full ridiculousness of his position is on display when the bush he is using for shade dies.

God asks him: “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush.”

“Yes,” says Jonah. “Angry enough to die.”

In Jonah’s petulant anger we encounter the anger of the laborers haggling with the vineyard owner. But we also encounter ourselves, that old familiar cry that life isn’t fair, that we haven’t received our due from God. Bitterness, either at our own misfortune or the good fortune of others, blinds us to our need for repentance and healing in a broken world.

It is when we let go of our pride and our own sense of what God owes us and the world that we encounter the graciousness, the merciful God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, the God who comes into the great marketplace of the world and calls all of us to labor in the vineyard. This is the God who desires a relationship with us, a God whose wages are more than sufficient and whose vineyard is always in need of laborers.