

Exodus 16:2-4,11-12

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹²"I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

Matthew 20:1-16

²⁰ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage,^[a] he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.^[b] ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.^[c] ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?^[d] ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'^[e] ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Last week's Gospel was about the rich man forgiving his servant a great debt and then being angry because that very same forgiven servant will not forgive another lesser debt owed to him.

In telling it Jesus challenged us to not place any limits on forgiveness but to be as generous with others as God is with us. It was a lesson in the Economics of Forgiveness.

Now Jesus uses yet another very ordinary everyday economic situation to teach us about the Economics of God's grace.

One of the saddest things I have ever witnessed in my ministry was in the rust belt town of Clydebank. Originally the hub of shipbuilding and the place where all the famous Cunard ships, like the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth had been built. But the shipyards went away, and we had almost 100% unemployment.

The residue of the famous John Brown Shipyard was still partly operating building oil rigs.

Every morning before dawn, hundreds of skilled men would crowd around the main gates and at a given time the foremen would come out, point and say "You, you and you" .And hire some of them to work by the hour. All the others then had to either just go home or wait until the second hiring time later in the day.

Many of the men drove up to 80-100 miles each day just on the hope that they would be hired. If not, they trekked home again empty handed.

Meanwhile those who were hired got paid by the hour and worked in the open air with no benefits, no shelter, no restrooms, no food other than what they brought with them, and practically no safety precautions. It was barbaric and the sight of a foreman would cause a lot of vicious shoving and pushing to get to the front. Sometimes fights would break out.

I have never witnessed anything like it and here we have almost the same situation. The same struggle to make a living and feed a family. Giving rise to the same passions of envy, anger and desperation.

"The Kingdom of God is like....." begins Jesus who then introduces us to a landowner. Surprisingly, rather than sending his foreman, the owner himself goes down to the marketplace to hire workers.

On his first visit he hires some men and agrees a fair rate of pay for their labor.

Several times in the day he returns to hire more men. His final visit being so late in the day that there is only an hour of daylight left before work ends.

Then comes the shock! At the end of the day, all the workers are to be paid. To everyone's complete astonishment, they are all paid the same amount agreed with those who had been hired at dawn and who have sweated through the heat of the day.

Then there is more than astonishment...there is anger and confusion! Those hired first are furious. We can feel their anger. Have their efforts been demeaned? Are they to suffer this unjust insult? Is their self-esteem and value to be ignored?

One of them seems to have been appointed as spokesperson to express their grievances to the owner. Who replies :

'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

You have to wonder how it must have felt for those who had watched group after group of workers be picked up from the marketplace, as they were continually deemed unsuitable or undesirable. By the time he takes his final trip to the market, the landowner is faced with those who everyone else has tried to ignore. Their joy at being chosen at all at this late stage in the day would have certainly been something, but then to be paid the same as those more desirable workers chosen at the start of the day, that would have been almost unfathomable.

In different stages and circumstances in our lives, we have probably all found ourselves in the position of both the laborers who are struggling to accept what seems unfair, and those who have being surprised by undeserved grace and generosity. In this story once again the scandalous nature of the kingdom of God turns our understanding of what is fair and just on its head.

There are many lenses through which this text can be read, and Jesus himself offered no explanation to the parable. Building on previous explorations of the vision of the kingdom of God as described by Jesus, this passage challenges us to look at how our own values and reactions contrast and at times challenge the vision that is being put forward.

It can seem very unfair this idea of a God who levels the playing field, where reward is not based upon how long you've worked or the hard work that you've put in.

But there's also something incredibly beautiful in this story, of a God who gives according to need --not performance, recognizing that the need of all the laborers was in fact the same.

Jesus has again laid out that his Kingdom doesn't follow the rules that we are accustomed to.

The wealthy and those with positions of power and prestige are not necessarily of the upmost importance in his Kingdom. Whereas those who are viewed with little importance or prestige may in fact be at the fore in this new Kingdom.

Jesus presents us with the kingdom Economics of God's Grace. Here is a God who shows no partiality, who provides for each according to their need ...NOT by reckoning of a scale of good works.

The parable opens a window into the mystery of God's grace, the wonder of a God who is kind to each and all, so that in turn those who have experienced grace may live gracefully.

Jesus continually challenges our understanding of our place and our desire to earn position; it's no longer about doing, but about receiving. The pressures to achieve is off!

The Economics of God's Garce is more than abundant for everyone.