

The Question of the Week

“Or is your eye evil because I am generous?”

Matthew 20:15

The parable of the owner of the vineyard is the one parable of Jesus we love to hate. Why couldn't that vineyard owner been a little more generous with those who worked all day long? Would it have been so difficult? He gave the extra to the other workers and nothing extra to those who worked all day. It just seems to violate some deeply entrenched sense of fairness. And even deeper than that I find that when I hear this parable I intuitively identify with those who worked and slave in the heat of the day and walked away with just the usual day's pay. And I am not happy.

“Joshua and I worked hard all day. Samuel over there worked most of the day, he showed up at nine, Abraham and Jacob around noon. Old Eliakim about 3 in the afternoon and I don't know what happened to Simon but he only came out about an hour before quitting time. And they all got paid like they had worked the whole day. It isn't fair.” No, it probably isn't fair if one uses the prism of comparison to evaluate the situation. Compared to him who worked an hour and got a full day's pay, I am feeling very short-changed. On the other hand, how is that other man experiencing the owner's generosity? He is pretty happy. Why? Because he worked an hour and got paid for ten. Why didn't the owner use a sense of proportion and maybe pay the first workers double, for example?

Well, what exactly did the owner do? He looked at all these men, mostly family men who work as day laborers. The owner knows that those men earn a daily wage, bring it home and use it to buy food for their families for the next day. No work. No wage. So the owner, not wanting any of the men to go home to their families empty handed decides to make each man whole no matter how long he worked. A very generous thing to do. Not at all required by any yardstick of justice or morality. And for this act of generosity he receives their gratitude and appreciation. But because he was not uniformly generous he receives the “evil eye” from the ones who worked the longest, none of whom got short-changed. Each of the full day workers got what they agreed upon at the beginning of the day. No. They did not receive a generous gift from the owner but they were not cheated in any way. But they shoot him a look, we all know the look, the flashing evil and malice in the eyes. Because they didn't share in the generosity. They feel deprived but actually each man goes home with the same daily wage even though some worked harder for it than others. So which group do you tend to identify with when you hear this parable? The ones who feel shafted or the ones who are grateful? Why do you react that way? That is the question of the week.