

Growing up our family was a dessert family. I mean that we had dessert at every dinner- it was just part of the deal. It could be simple. Canned fruit was a regular (fruit cocktail was my least favorite). It could be applesauce with cinnamon sugar. Ice cream was a step up. But at the top were the cakes and pies my Mom baked. Mom was an Iowa farm girl and a really good cook. Fairly frequently we would come to dinner with a fresh pie or cake sitting on the counter waiting for us.

After the dinner plates were cleared, mom would rise and go over to the counter and begin slicing up the cake or pie – and then pass them out to Dad and each of us four kids. You may not be surprised to hear that my eye would always check out my siblings' pieces. Were they equal? An obvious discrepancy did not go unnoticed. "His is bigger than mine!" But on the whole Mom – not wanting to hear the whining, did a good job of giving us each the same size serving.

I approved of this system. It was fair. It was orderly. It was the way the world should operate all the time. But as useful as Mom's

justice with the serving knife was in keeping the peace in our family, my point in telling the story is – Mom's fairness is nothing at all like the Kingdom of God! As the Gospel parable today teaches – that concept of fairness is completely foreign to God. That sounds troubling, doesn't it?

“So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner.” But that grumbling is precisely why the landowner, representing Jesus, intentionally paid the last hired workers first: to provoke the rest into seeing in a new way.

The evening payment of the workers in the parable represents our final judgement when God will judge us using a very simple standard: His unconditional love for all. But oh, how we resist that law! We are always comparing our piece of the pie with our neighbor's. Our eyes are always wandering. I must never allow myself to be cheated out of what is my due. This worldly wisdom teaches it's a jungle out there, so I have to fight to get mine.

Jesus, the landowner, understands this way of thinking. But He has come to deliberately overthrow it, because it's completely incompatible with His Kingdom, ruled by God's unconditional love for all. The World and God's Kingdom are so different because justice in this world is based on getting what we deserve, while the Kingdom of Heaven is a place operating under a grace that nobody can ever deserve or earn. (Did I deserve or earn any pie?) Before God's mercy all people are alike, equally sinners, equally powerless, and equally loved. Why some are hired early and some late, why some seem more important or blessed than others: all these questions that consume our human calculations and philosophies here and now, are, in God's Kingdom, washed away by the ocean of His redeeming grace.

The workers who are hired first complain to Jesus/the Landowner about the late comers, "You have made them equal to us." But Jesus is not impressed with such claims of moral and social superiority, or even difference. Behind the first workers' claim for justice lurks a deeper

objection. Our individual identities often depend on separating ourselves from others. We look for ways we are more worthy than others, because the World's great lie is that life's a zero-sum game where there's not enough happiness for everybody. So, I must win my share, even though that means you must get, or be, less. Therefore, I'm continually looking around. Am I getting enough? Do you have more?

I still struggle with this Law of Christ's Kingdom. I still often assume God should be more like my Mom. But then, that's because when I hear this parable, I assume that I'm one of the workers hired in the first hour. So, I get to judge God's treatment of me, and think, "Who are you, God, to pretend we human beings are equal when we're so obviously in different categories? How dare you love those people without them having worked hard enough to earn it?" We spend more time judging God's lack of fairness in divvying out worldly blessings than we think about by what standard God will judge us some day.

“My Friend, I am not cheating you . . . am I not free to do as I wish with my own?” The whole point of this homily has been simply that The Kingdom of Heaven is very strange and doesn’t pretend to conform to our ideas of fairness. We’re quite correct to feel God’s not acting fairly in our lives. But – (literally) thank God -- for that! In His Kingdom He surpasses justice with His mercy. He wants to give us ultimately more than what’s fair. And we still resist Him!

Human fairness is not good enough for God. The Kingdom’s law will change everyone who tries to live by it. That is the Gospel’s power. That’s why the saints seem both so strange, and so attractive, to us. Even now, they’re living in a completely different Kingdom, living by different rules than the rest of us do. But until we start living under the law of the Kingdom of Heaven, we won’t experience its freedom – and so we’ll continue to assume it means only getting cheated out of our due share of cake, when, in fact, it means we can have the whole thing.