

The laborers in the vineyard

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



Just before Jesus entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, Jesus told a very interesting parable. It's sometimes known as the "Laborers in the vineyard" (Matthew 20:1-16).

You remember how it goes: A landowner hires laborers

for his vineyard at 6 a.m., promising them that he would pay the usual daily wage. Then he hired more laborers at 9, noon, 3 and 5. When the day's work was over, the landowner paid all the laborers, starting with those who were hired last. Sure enough, they got the daily wage. Those hired first who worked the entire day got exactly the same wage. They weren't pleased.

"Now, when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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' " (verses 10-12). Not fair!

Jesus' parables are meant to shake us up a little bit. There is often a twist that catches us and makes us think. But it's hard to find the logic in this one, much less the good news. What's the point? And what's the point of working all day only to get paid as much as those who came last?

A moment of confession here—I always identify with the laborers who worked all day. I am the conscientious one. I work and pay my taxes and go to church and support public radio and buy Girl Scout cookies. I use my turn signal and allow the car in front of me to merge into traffic. I am kind to animals and never remove the tag on furniture that says "Do Not Remove This Tag."

Are reprobates and slackers really equal to me in God's eyes?

My reaction is quite telling. I am making several assumptions—that I am deserving, that other people are not deserving, and that God

operates according to my standards of fairness and justice. It doesn't strike me as contradictory that I regularly confess that "I am captive to sin and cannot free myself" and, at the same time, consider myself a paragon of virtue.

The landowner's words, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (verse 15) really sting. Yes, I am envious and angry. Jesus' economics don't make sense. This is not the way to run a business.

I take some small comfort in the fact that I am not alone. A lot of us identify with the first laborers and expect extra credit for our good work. If this wasn't true, Jesus would not have told this parable. Funny—I preach about grace and don't like it. Oh, grace for me is fine, but not for those who don't deserve it.

Oops! That is the point. Grace is not something we deserve or earn or can work for. We are all utterly dependent upon God's mercy, and God is very prodigal with mercy. The grace that all the laborers received—those who worked all day and those who worked for an hour—is that they all got a job, not because of their effort but from the generosity of the landowner. The grace that we receive is that God first loved us.

"While we were still weak ... while we were still sinners ... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Romans 5:6-10). Working hard doesn't make God love us more.

Here is the good news in this parable: God has called us into a relationship through Christ, into God's intimate and deep love. If some of us are blessed to realize this our whole lives, give thanks. If some only come to know this at the last hour, rejoice. A graceful response to this grace is that the first are overjoyed for the last. 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: bishop@elca.org.