Through the years, this morning's parable has become one of my favorites. It does not rise to the level of the Prodigal Son in my list of favorites, but it is high on the list, and I smile every time it makes its appearance on the carousel of lectionary readings for Sunday. That was not always the case. Early in my Christian journey I disliked this story. It offended my sense of fairness. I still had not broken free of my old categories of right and wrong, and I still tried to fit God's vision of living into those old categories. It took me years to accept how radical, different, and beautiful God's vision of life was for all his children.

Let's begin with the obvious. The landowner in the story is not fair. Most of can understand the consternation of the workers who went to the vineyard early in the morning. They had watched as more workers showed up throughout the day. They remembered the landowner promised to pay them fairly—give them a full day's wage. If they thought about it at all, they probably thought the later workers would be paid less. That, of course, is why the story has the landowner insist on paying the last first. Jesus wants his listeners to relate to the early workers. Of course they are ticked off. They have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. They should be paid more. It is not fair.

Like all the parables, the story of the Laborers in the Vineyard, is like an onion, or like Shrek. It has many layers. Let's look a few of the layers.

The first church I served was in downtown San Antonio. An employment center was just down the street from the church. Every morning men would line up and cluster outside the center, hoping to find work for the day. At dawn men would arrive in pickup trucks, point to a few men who would climb into the truck beds. In moments they would drive away to work. A few minutes later a man with a clipboard would come out the door, pick a few men, check off his list and give them directions for where to go for their day's work. When he finished he would walk back into the building. The men who were left standing
would shuffle around for a few minutes before they turned toward the city park. That is where they would spend the rest of their day. They showed no sign of pleasure in not being picked for a job that day. To passersby, these men were “idle” in the park. In reality they were wondering what they would eat and where they would sleep.

The men who won the day-worker lottery that day had a bonus gift. Not only did they have work, not only would they be paid, they also knew they would have money at the end of the day. They had peace of mind. How much was that worth to the workers in the parable who were hired in the morning? They had no hours of uncertainty, no reason to worry about eating that night or having food for their children. How much of a gift is that peace of mind?

That is a superficial level of the work onion—something obvious when you think about it for a minute.

We might discover another layer when we consider the church. I thank God for the men and women in the church in Bellevue Nebraska who cared enough about me to help me come to faith in Christ. They were devoted to the church and they worked hard to share the good news. They cared about their neighbors—about their souls and their salvation.

Some of those good people, however, had a problem when the new Christians began to take the lead in church. They were offended. After all, the old members had been there when they bought the property. They had spent hours refurbishing the building and cleaning the bathrooms. They had canvased the neighborhood every Saturday for months, knocking on doors and inviting people to church. They had invested hours and months of blood, sweat and tears in the church—and now some of the newcomers walked in like they owned the place. On top of that, some of the newcomers didn’t seem to understand how things were supposed to work. Sure, they brought new energy, but they also brought new ideas. No one ever said it in my hearing, but you could hear the shadow of words in the building: *Who do they think they are? This is my church.*
It is easy to criticize those old timers, but we should give them their due. They had worked hard, and they sincerely cared about the church. Their faith was their passion, and they did not understand what was happening around them—but deep down some of them thought what was happening just wasn’t fair.

One thing that is absolutely clear about the parable is that it is not fair. God’s way of life is not about fairness; it’s about generosity and compassion and good will. It is also about joy in the labor. Sometimes I get discouraged, sometimes I feel like I am running out of gas—but in the deepest and firmest place of my awareness I know living for Jesus is the place of joy—it is land of meaning, purpose and joy.

In the world, being fair is an important measure of many things. It’s why we have rules for the game. But few of us believe the world is really fair. We’ve talked about the sins of privilege and entitlement many times before—and that kind of unfairness is an affront to God’s plan for humanity. Unjust discrimination in any form is a sin. It claws at God’s dream of peace and unity and love. When we think of sick babies, it is only fair that every child be cared for equally, that all our children get the care they need. It is only fair—and we should all fight for that fairness. The idea that good health care is only for those who can afford it is an affront to every decent human being.

We need to stand firmly, unwavering, for that kind of fairness. But there is another kind of fairness we need to get over. In the way of the world, sometimes you get a good deal, sometimes I get a good deal, and sometimes someone else gets a good deal.

Robyn is a master haggler. I’ve watched her in action in the marketplaces of Europe and the Middle East, haggling over the price of spices or seafood. She bargains hard, but at the end of the deal, she knows the merchant has to make a profit. His life and the life of his family depend on it.

I always haggle when I buy a car, but at the end of the day I know it is okay if I paid a little bit more than I had to. The more I pay is a good thing for the man or woman who sells me the car—maybe a good thing for his or her family. Sometimes I get a good deal, and sometime
someone else gets a good deal. When I am in Christ, I can rejoice both times—all the time. We all get the good deal in Jesus.

Let me offer a word of grace. Don't be too hard on yourself if you feel slighted sometimes, if you feel you have been treated unfairly. We don't always see the big picture; we don't always know we are held firm in God’s care. There is a place of the spirit where these questions of fairness go away. When we feel slighted, we simply need to know we still have some growing to do. We're not finished, and we're not as free as we are meant to be.

We're all still untangling ourselves from the old life. This parable is one of the clearest windows for us to see the state of our souls. Are we still grumbling when things are not fair, or do we rejoice when something excessively good happens to someone else? Can we, the early laborers, receive the gift of life joyfully, and rejoice that those who came late got the same good deal?

When Jesus taught these stories to his disciples he was on his way to Jerusalem. He wanted his disciples to understand the fundamentals of how they were to live differently in the world. It was a radical difference, strange, self-denying and sacrificial. At first it seemed like Jesus was calling them to give up everything—and he was. Only later did they realize that everything they gave up made room for the true life, full and overflowing every day. They were called to a radically different way of living—and they learned the radical rightness of the new way. As the Spirit changed their hearts, even their minds recognized the of course of the new way. This is freedom, this is life disentangled from having to have it my way. At last we can breathe.

The parable is about a disposition of heart. It is about attitude, and about the way we measure the events of the day. Are we still the constant reference point for what happens? Are we still trapped in the vise grip of our expectations? Does our judgment of what is fair or right close out the needs, hopes and dreams of others? Or have we received the freedom to see others, to see deeper into their lives, to cross over from ourselves to care for them, to weep with them in their sorrow, and rejoice with them in their good fortune? Do we feel the work of Christ in
us, the work of his Spirit in us to change our hearts and minds— to help us to see and live big, expansive lives, with clarity and grace, courage and compassion?

This week I wrote a different ending to the parable. After everyone was paid they realized they had enough to stop off at the local tavern on the way home. And they rejoiced together.