

Thirty-five years ago I was a supervisor in a clerical unit of an insurance company. I supervised about thirty clerks, most of whom were female with minimal education and in some cases even less than minimal keyboard skills. It was a job for which I was totally unsuited but in which I learned a lot. The cost of education is not entirely paid in hard currency. One of the tasks that I dreaded was the annual budgeting process because I was responsible for evaluating the performance and calculating the increases for all of my staff. We were not talking large dollar amounts here either so the gyrations we went through to be sure that everyone received their increase based on merit often resulted in the difference of a few dollars between an outstanding performer and one that was simply satisfactory. The calculations were complicated enough but rendered doubly so when I had to factor in the projected costs of adding or replacing staff because I would then have to take into consideration increased salary ranges provided by Human Resources. These salary ranges sometimes made the entry level salaries higher than those of my outstanding performers. And that just didn't seem fair. Moreover you know that people weren't supposed to discuss their salaries with one another but human nature being what it is of course they did and imagine the consternation when someone who had been working in the department for 10 years found out that a new hire was going to be making more than her!

No matter how we humans try, even in attempting to be fair, or at least how we define fair, we always seem to fall short.

Which brings us to our gospel lesson. So how many of you identified with the laborers who had been hired first? I mean, who wouldn't? Most of us do our best at the tasks we have been given and we expect to be rewarded fairly for our efforts. I know that if I had worked all day in a vineyard, getting hot and sticky, and dirty, and covered with scratches from working the vines I would be really upset to find out that people who had just arrived, those laborers who had been hired at the last minute, who were not as hot, and not as sticky, and not as dirty, and not as covered with scratches as I was, had been paid the same amount as me...I would be pissed! Just as I was pissed on those occasions when I found out about salary inequities that affected me or my staff.

Those original laborers were hired early in the morning they would have worked for 12 hours or so. Four more times the landowner goes out to hire more laborers. Each of whom is promised the daily wage of one denarius. Now one denarius was like minimum wage and was barely enough to keep a small family alive. But it was a wage, the work in the vineyard was work with the promise of a wage. What the original workers in the vineyard had was the security of knowing that they could feed their families for another day. They were part of a system, it was not a generous system but they were freed from the anxiety of wondering if they would be able to live another day. Not so the laborers who were hired later. They were idle because no one

had hired them. Imagine how it would feel, knowing that your family depended on you and you were not able to earn a wage, let alone a living wage. The anxiety, the crushing anxiety must have been terrible. All we have to do is read or hear about the hundreds of thousands of unemployment claims that have been filed because of the pandemic and we can realize that this problem is very close to home. How relieved then must the later groups of laborers have been to be hired and to receive that daily wage.

So Jesus' story is a parable and parables are open to multiple interpretation. What does Matthew seem to be telling us in his version of the parable? "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." It's not too much of a stretch to see the landowner as God offering salvation to those who want accept his offer. For those of us who have accepted God's offer we have the promise of the gifts of the Spirit "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Gal 5:22) I would also add the hope of eternal life that we share with Christ in his eternal priesthood. Some days we might not be feeling the gift but the gift is there and we "sometimes" have the courage to accept it. God's promise does not mean that we will be protected from physical danger or any of the ills that might befall us but rather the knowledge that God is with us no matter what might befall us.

That's security. That's far more security than any daily wage, any salary increase, or incentive bonus can provide. We also know that God's generosity knows no bounds. God is always reaching out, pursuing us to call us back into the fold. Remember how Jesus tells the parable of the shepherd with 100 sheep, that he will leave the 99 to go look for the one who is lost. (Matt 18:12-14) No sensible shepherd would leave all those sheep behind and no sensible business owner would hire people for a full day's wage when they can only do an hour of work. God's ways are not our ways. No sensible God would have kept that surly bunch of ingrates alive in the desert, providing them with food, both bread and meat, and water, overlooking their constant complaining and guiding them to a Promised Land. But that is just what God did and it is what God does.

So nope, God's ways are not our ways. God is always searching to bring us back to him. This can raise the question of salvation in terms of faith vs works. We proclaim that we are saved by faith through grace, that we cannot earn our way into "heaven". If we could Jesus would not have had to die for us. So does it matter if we work hard at our salvation, trying to follow God's commands, falling short and having to confess our sinfulness? Ever-living with the fact that we always fall short? Does that feel like "salvation?" And if so then what of those who come to Jesus, who finally accept God towards the end of their lives or who even have some kind of death-bed conversion? It doesn't seem fair does it - that those who have toiled all their lives as Christians would receive the same reward as those who after living their lives outside of

God's law can have the gates of heaven opened at the last moment. Christian denominations are all over the map on this one and it even varies within denominations.

Nevertheless I think that Jesus has the last word on this one. "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matt 20:16)

(Get over it) We who have already been called may be reminded of the gift we have been given in this blessing from the end of our Eucharist.

*The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always.
Amen.*