

PREPOSTEROUS GRACE
(Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16)

Jesus told stories about some pretty crazy people. There's the farmer who scatters seed willy-nilly on the road and the rocks and among the thorns. There's the father who throws his dignity to the wind to welcome back his worthless runaway son. There's the shepherd who risks leaving 99 sheep to go look for one stray instead of doing the prudent thing and cutting his losses.

And today we've got a farmer who's as crazy as the rest. If this fellow ran a vineyard in the Napa Valley there would be pickets at the gate carrying signs decrying "Unfair Labor Practices!" and demanding "Equal Pay for Equal Work." And an officer from the National Labor Relations Board might come knocking.

The workers in this story who put in 8 or 10 hours have a legitimate gripe. Of course, the latecomers who only worked an hour think they've got the best boss ever. They open their envelopes and find a full day's pay and they can hardly believe their eyes. And when the ones who had worked all day open their envelopes, they don't want to believe their eyes. They're expecting more, some kind of bonus. If this is some kind of joke, they're not laughing. The boss has done them wrong – cheated them – and they're steamed up and want to know what's going on.

Welcome to the wonderful world of Jesus – which, by the way, according to Jesus just happens to be how things are in heaven.

It's certainly not how things are here on earth – and not even how they're supposed to be. All our notions of fairness and justice and evenhandedness say we ought to be on the side of the workers who toiled from sunup to sundown and not side with the lucky latecomers who get something for nothing – or at least get something for very little.

But let's take a closer look at those lucky latecomers. I call them lucky, but it's not like they won the lottery or found a buried treasure. They had been there in the marketplace all day, ready to work, eager to work, hoping to work – and worried what they'd do if they didn't get hired. They're not idlers who think the world owes them a living.

And what exactly did they get at the end of the day? They got a denarius, a Roman silver coin a bit smaller than a nickel. The Romans didn't have anything like a minimum wage law, but a denarius was the standard daily wage for a laborer and that was supposed to be enough to feed a peasant family for one day. Laborers like these lived from hand to mouth, from day to day. They're the folks Jesus had in mind when he taught the disciples to pray, "give us this day our daily bread" – folks who lived one day at a time and didn't have a pantry they could stock for days or weeks. If they got paid anything less than a denarius, or didn't get paid at all, somebody went hungry.

This parable reflects a state of affairs that's foreign to most of us but that's still a fact of life for many at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. I thought of this parable when I was in Jerusalem years ago because there was a street

corner not far from where I was staying where Palestinian men gathered every morning hoping that someone would come along and hire them for the day. Some of them were still waiting when the sun started to set. And I think of this parable when I visit my mother in Texas and drive past the place where Hispanic men gather and wait and hope, just as day laborers did in Jesus time did and as they still do in Israel and all around the world.

Did anyone in this story get justice? The lucky guys who only worked an hour were too thrilled to care what it was called. But the ones who worked all day sure cared. As far as they're concerned, it wasn't anything like justice. They got ripped off. If they had known things were going to turn out this way, they would have hung out in the shade all day and gone to work with the last bunch. They have a clear idea of justice based on fairness and equality and rights and a strict system of rewards. You get what you earn.

But here's a more basic question: Are fairness and equality and rights the only way to define and measure justice? Suppose the guys who worked all day got their denarius and those who only worked an hour got something less. Strict mathematical equality. But the end result is that the ones who work all day get to eat that night and those who aren't so lucky and only work an hour go to bed hungry.

In the crazy, wonderful world of Jesus, justice isn't about equality between individuals, but about relations in something like a family. Imagine a farm that doesn't hire day workers but depends on family members to pitch in and do their part. Dad and the oldest son go out early and work all through the day, but Mom and little sister go out in the afternoon. And little sister doesn't really do much work but goes around playing in the dirt and getting in the way. At the end of the day, they all go home and sit down to dinner. Does everyone get just what they earned? Of course not. Everyone eats until they're full – and no one complains and no one is jealous and everyone is happy.

That, Jesus says, is kind of what heaven is like – a place where needs count more than earnings.

It's frankly hard to talk about justice in a society that gives lip service to equality but cultivates inequality at every turn.

For example, Katrina Gill worked as a nursing aide in the dementia ward of long-term care facility near Portland, Ore. From 10:30 p.m. to 7 a.m., she was on duty alone, caring for as many as 28 patients. She monitored vitals, turned patients to prevent bedsores, tracked down wanderers, and changed adult diapers. And for this she was paid \$9.32 an hour. She eventually quit that job and took another one that paid 68 cents an hour more, which brought her salary all the way up to \$14,400 a year. But like many health-care jobs, hers one doesn't provide health-care benefits. So she and her mechanic husband pay \$640 a month for a policy and have racked up \$160,000 in medical debts for their son Brandyn's cancer care.

Katrina's story comes from an article in Business Week in 2004. The article goes on to say that "more than 28 million people, about a quarter of the workforce between the ages of 18 and 64, earn less than \$9.04 an hour, which translates into a full-time salary of \$18,800 a year – the income that marks the

federal poverty line for a family of four” and that according to the Census Bureau, 63% of U.S. families below the federal poverty line have one or more workers.

We tolerate the widest income disparities of any industrialized country – and those disparities are getting wider – because we cling to the fantasy that anyone with enough pluck and grit can pull themselves up the economic ladder. We want to believe that even when all the evidence points in the other direction.

The typical CEO earns 344 times what the average factory worker earns (that was in 2007) and probably considers that fair and just. But wealth is power, and one of the advantages of power is that the powerful get to define reality – including justice – and make others believe your definition.

John Smith is said to have motivated the Jamestown colonists by threatening that anyone who was unwilling to work wouldn't eat, a line that he borrowed from 2 Thessalonians (3:10). Wouldn't it be reasonable to turn that around and say that anyone who is not only willing to work but actually working ought to be able to eat and have a decent standard of living? Can we agree that anyone who works full time shouldn't be poor? And isn't the existence of such a large underclass of working poor in this country nothing less than a scandal? William Sloane Coffin said, “In the United States grim poverty is a tragedy that great wealth makes a sin.”

Justice is a theme that runs all through the Bible. Jesus stood in the long line of prophets whose watchword was justice. But justice for Jesus and the prophets always takes the poor into account, always provides for those at the bottom. By their definition, any system, any society, that expects the poor to make do with the crumbs that fall from the tables of the rich is unjust. I wonder what they would say about ours.