

Every Wednesday night I go to jail. I enter the chapel at Western Missouri Correctional Center with about 20 inmates and an officer who helps keep order. Most of the guys are regulars, but a few come and go. We celebrate mass together, and I lead them in a discussion about the gospel.

It's been fascinating. Altogether there are about 2000 inmates over there; 200 or so are Catholics. I get to see the twenty nicest criminals. These are ordinary guys who did something stupid. One says he fell in with the wrong friends. Another admits substance abuse. Another got behind the wheel of a car when he shouldn't have and caused a fatal accident. For the most part, my 20 guys say prayers every day. They try to live respectful of others in a place where that is especially hard to do. They come every Wednesday because they can spend an hour with other guys who want to change their lives, who won't make fun of you because you're kind, and who are counting the days till they can be with their wives and kids.

A few weeks ago the gospel we used for mass there was this one I just read. I expected the usual complaints. This has to be the most hated parable in the gospels. A landowner hires day workers for his vineyard. Some start work at 6 a.m., but others start at 5 p.m. The guy promises to pay the usual daily wage. And he does. At 6 p.m., everybody gets the same pay, even though some had worked twelve hours, right through the heat of the day, and others had worked only one hour in the cool of the evening. Jesus explains that the landowner is just. He pays the first workers what he promised; but he is also merciful, showing exceptional kindness to those who came in last.

Most people side with the first workers: "It's not fair." Baseball players say if an owner wants to be generous to one player, he has redefined what is just for everyone else. Most people think generosity and justice cannot go together. If you are generous with one person, you are unjust to others.

But the prisoners at Western Missouri surprised me. One of them said, "This is my favorite parable, because it shows that everybody has a chance." They all agreed. They loved hearing the story that the last workers got as much reward as those who had worked all day. I told them most people think this parable is unfair. One of them said to me, "You're lookin' at the five o'clock boys, Father."

Every Wednesday night I go to jail. And every Wednesday night I leave the jail. I walk out the front door, get into my car and drive home, where I am free to come and go as I please, in spite of my sins. On Wednesday nights I think about God's generosity. Each day is a gift. No matter how long or how short I live, how much or how little I earn, God gives me more than what is just.