

Well, "That's not fair!" That's what you're thinking, right? "That's not fair! If I were one of those workers I'd give that owner a piece of my mind. He cannot pay people who worked one hour the same wage as people who worked twelve. There are unions. There are laws. There are witnesses. Just let him come out tomorrow morning at dawn and see how many workers he gets. We'll see who's first, who's last, and who laughs last." When Jesus finished this parable, I'm sure he had a riot on his hands."

And he tells this parable unprovoked. There's no problem they're asking him about. It's like an afterthought. In the middle of some other conversation he lets it slip: "Oh, by the way, here's something else you may want to know about the reign of God." (Did he hesitate to wonder what the reaction might be?) "Full employment. There's gonna be full employment in the reign of God. Nobody out of work." Sounds great. Till he explains payday.

If you're the first worker in the vineyard it doesn't seem fair. If you got your bicycle when you were eight and your sister gets one when she's six, it doesn't seem fair. If you spend hours studying and the goof-off next to you gets higher grades, it doesn't seem fair. If you spend all morning doing your hair and your pastor's is naturally curly, it doesn't seem fair. If you were baptized as an infant and you see some pagan adult baptized in full splendor at the Easter Vigil it doesn't seem fair. If you spend years in a high school confirmation program and you see a child confirmed it doesn't seem fair. And if after a long faithful life on earth you die and see in heaven people you know are sinners, who did all those things you wanted to do, it won't seem fair.

And yet this is precisely the term Jesus uses in today's Gospel to describe the wage. "I will pay you," the owner promises the latecomers, "I will pay you whatever is fair." What is fair? Being fair isn't fair enough. Generosity is fair. Generosity is fair.

Jesus tells this parable to reveal the jealousy in our hearts. We are jealous when he is so generous. It's hard to rejoice at another's good fortune. And yet, if I were the worker who arrived last at the vineyard and I got that big lottery-winning paycheck I would take the money and run. With glee.

If fair were fair there would be no jealousy, but there would also be no joy. Where fair is generous there's lot of joy to go around. In the reign of God there is joy aplenty. And full employment.