

“What must I do to be saved?” Jesus answered: Keep the law. In 2003, two researchers at Emory University conducted an experiment with capuchin monkeys.

Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal had taught the monkeys a simple transaction. A monkey would hand a small token to a researcher and receive a piece of cucumber in return. It worked perfectly well. The monkey handed over the token. The researcher handed over the cucumber. The monkey ate it. Then the researchers changed one thing. Two monkeys were placed where they could see each other. The first handed over her token and received the usual cucumber. But when the second monkey completed exactly the same task, the researcher gave her something considerably better: a grape. Capuchins love grapes.

Now the first monkey was offered another cucumber. This time she looked at it, looked at the monkey eating the grape, and wanted nothing to do with it. In the now-famous video of the experiment, she takes the cucumber and throws it back at the researcher.

Nothing about the cucumber had changed. A few moments earlier, it had been perfectly acceptable compensation. What changed was what the monkey beside her received. Apparently, humans are not entirely alone in keeping an eye on what is happening in the next cubicle.

We think military pay is fair because everyone in the same rank is paid the same. But Some people get promoted faster than others.(Erased signatures)

Researchers studying pay transparency have found something similar among us. Learning what other people earn can affect how satisfied employees are with their own pay, particularly when they discover their relative standing is lower than they expected. The paycheck did not get smaller. The cucumber did not taste any worse. Someone else got a grape.

And that brings us remarkably close to the vineyard in today’s Gospel Lesson.

The disciples had been watching the dynamics of this happening and they were quite disturbed. Jewish tradition had always taught that God had especially blessed rich men and that is why he was rich. In their way of thinking, if a wealthy man could not receive salvation, then how could a poor

man have any hope? They asked of Jesus: who then can be saved? The question for the Prosperity gospel.

It reminds me of the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. The poor Jewish milkman who lives in early 1900 Russia sings what he would do "if I were a rich man." His wife reminds him: money is a curse. He immediately shouts up to heaven: curse me God, curse me. Jesus has just turned away a wealthy man, and in the Jewish way of thinking it doesn't make any sense. In fact, I am not sure how many preachers would have the courage to do it.

But it was Simon Peter who drew the question even more clearly into focus for us. He asked what is on the mind of every one of us, only we are too sophisticated to ask it and too self-righteous to admit that we even think it. Peter didn't have any problem with that. He simply laid his cards out on the table. He said, "Lord, we have given up everything, riches and all, to follow you." What then shall we have?" In others words, what's in this for us Lord. How do we stand to profit? Where's the payoff?

*In response to Peter's question, Jesus told a story.. At 7 A. M Then, about noon, then ast 3, . Toward the end of the day there was still a need for more men. So, at 5 P.M. the landowner went back into town and hired more laborers.*

At sunset all of the men lined up to be paid. When they got their envelopes, lo and behold, all of them had been paid the same amount. The men who had worked eleven hours had been paid the same as the men who had worked one hour. This enraged the all day workers. But the landowner replied, "Do you begrudge me my generosity?" Am I not allowed to do what I please with what belongs to me?

This parable of Jesus must have fallen like a big thud upon the ears of its listeners. Here Simon Peter had asked Jesus a serious question and in reply he gets a story that on the surface sounds quite ludicrous. A landowner that pays equal wages for men who do not work equal hours. Why, that's not the American way. That runs counter to our whole system of justice and fair play. Who would work all day if you could simply wait till the last hour and then collect a day's pay? The fact is that deep within us we have a kind of sympathy for those grumbling laborers. The story that Jesus told turns our whole economic system upside down.

Simon must have been particularly offended by the story because it is obvious who he identifies with. He sees himself as that laborer who was chosen early in the morning and worked all day. He doesn't comprehend why these Johnny-Come-Latelys should have preferential treatment. Now, don't get Simon Peter wrong. He is not opposed to favors being dispensed. He simply believes that if anyone should receive them it should be those who worked in the fields all day people just like himself.

By telling this story Jesus is informing Simon Peter that he will get no more reward from discipleship than anyone else. The person who comes late is just as important as the one who comes early. There is no such thing as an ecclesiastical hierarchy. The bishops need forgiveness just as much as the newest convert.

But Jesus is reaching for something larger than jealousy. He is asking what happens to our understanding of goodness when goodness is extended to someone else, especially when we don't think that person has earned it.

That is where this parable becomes dangerous, because there are circumstances in which our objection to unequal treatment is not petty at all. There are inequalities we should protest. There are injustices that should make us angry. Scripture does not ask us to call exploitation generosity or indifference mercy. Sometimes the person holding the cucumber has every reason to say, "This isn't fair."

And that takes us from a laboratory at Emory University to a cemetery in Belfast, Northern Ireland, on March 16, 1988.

Thousands of mourners had gathered at Milltown Cemetery for the funerals of three IRA members. Among the people there was a twenty-year-old named Thomas McErlean. Then Michael Stone attacked. He threw grenades and fired into the crowd. Three people were killed that day. Thomas McErlean was one of them. Dozens more were injured.

Stone was arrested and eventually convicted of six murders, including the three at Milltown, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Thomas's sister, Deborah McGuinness, could reasonably have believed that whatever else happened in the years ahead, the man who murdered her brother would spend a very long time in prison.

History had other plans.

A decade later, Northern Ireland stood at the edge of something that had seemed nearly impossible. After thirty years of sectarian violence, political leaders were trying to construct a peace agreement. Catholics and Protestants, Unionists and Nationalists, the British and Irish governments, with American involvement under Senator George Mitchell, were trying to find some way out of the Troubles.

Peace came with a price. One of the most painful provisions arising from the Good Friday Agreement provided for the accelerated release of qualifying paramilitary prisoners. On July 24, 2000, Michael Stone walked out of prison. He had served about twelve years.

Deborah McGuinness never accepted that twelve years settled the account. Years later, as she continued challenging decisions concerning Stone's imprisonment, she explained her purpose plainly: she wanted to ensure that Michael Stone served his sentence in full.

It would be easy, from a safe distance, to explain the politics of Northern Ireland to her. Peace required compromises. Old enemies had to relinquish something. A generation exhausted by funerals needed a way forward. But it would be considerably harder to look at a woman whose twenty-year-old brother was murdered and tell her that twelve years was enough.

And perhaps now we begin to understand why the workers in the vineyard are worth taking seriously. There are ledgers we keep because we are envious. There are also ledgers we keep because justice matters. The difficulty is that Jesus tells a story in which the ledger cannot explain everything.

The prophet Isaiah had warned us about that long before: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Is. 55:8).

That verse is often quoted when life makes no sense, as though God's ways are merely mysterious. But beside Jesus' vineyard, it sounds considerably more unsettling. Perhaps God's ways are difficult to understand not because they are hidden from us. Perhaps sometimes we understand exactly what God is doing. We simply don't think He should do it.

Paul seems to have reached that strange place in today's reading from Philippians. He is writing from prison, uncertain whether he will live or die, and yet the usual arithmetic has ceased to work for him. "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (Phil. 1:21). He would prefer to depart and be with Christ, but he knows that remaining may be better for those who still need

him. Even life and death are no longer being measured according to what Paul himself receives. His calculation begins somewhere else.

That may be the distance between our ways and God's ways that Isaiah is describing. We measure hours and wages. We measure what was done to us and what should be done in return. We notice who arrived first, who worked hardest, who earned what. Much of the time, those measurements are necessary. Justice depends upon some of them. But grace introduces something into the equation that cannot be calculated by what someone deserves.

The landowner never tells the first workers that twelve hours and one hour are the same thing. They plainly are not. Nor does he tell them that their labor did not matter. He pays them exactly what he promised. What he refuses to accept is their conclusion that because they earned their denarius, nobody else should receive one unless they earned it in precisely the same way.

That distinction matters. Grace does not require us to pretend that wrong is right, that twelve years in prison somehow equals a murdered brother, or that justice no longer matters. Deborah McGuinness had every right to insist that her brother's life mattered and that his murder mattered. The peace agreement did not make Michael Stone innocent. Mercy does not rewrite the past. It asks whether the past has the final word about the future.

But yet, that just doesn't seem fair. that is our point of reference. What do you think would happen if a person joined the church this morning and immediately after receiving the vows of profession of faith suggested to the congregation that he or she be nominated to become a deacon and immediately be the head of the Parish Council? What do you think the reaction would be? Well, I think I know what the reaction would be. The laity would protest as loudly as Simon Peter is protesting to Jesus.

You see, we live in a world of tenure and seniority and it goes against our grain when we hear Jesus say, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." Certainly this was foreign to the Jewish mentality, for they were God's chosen people. They were the laborers who had been in the field and worked hard all day long.

Of course, their real problem, and in turn our problem, is that we really do not comprehend the nature of God's unmerited grace. We sing songs like "Amazing Grace," but the truth is that we usually are uncomfortable with last

minute, death bed conversions. We feel that these persons have gotten the best of both worlds. It doesn't seem fair.

But God's grace is not based upon what is fair, but rather what helps. It wasn't fair that the laborers who worked only an hour receive a full day's wages, but look who they were. All day they had been in the Town Square and no one had chosen them for employment. They were the rejects. You know, even as a child in grammar school I distantly remember feeling uncomfortable when sides were chosen for teams, because invariably there were a couple of kids who got left out. They were always the last ones to be selected, and you could see the hurt on their faces. The landowner asked of them: Why are you standing idle. Their response: Because no one has hired us. They were the rejects, the bottom of the barrel.

Now go back to the beginning of the parable and reread what the landowner said to those he hired at the beginning of the day. He said, "I will pay you what is right." What he paid these last workers who were in the fields only one hour was not correct based upon the minimum hourly wage scale, but it was right because of the desperateness of their condition. God's grace isn't based upon fairness; it is based upon what is right

If there is any special payoff for being selected early to labor in the Lord's field, it is simply the inner satisfaction that we receive from being in God's employ. But we are so much like those all day laborers. Notice how they worded it: we carried the burden in the heat of the day. Isn't that precisely so often how we look upon service in the church: Not a joy, not a privilege but a burden to carry in the heat of the day? Clearly when Simon Peter asked Jesus what they were to receive from the Kingdom, he had in mind something a little more substantial than inner satisfaction.

But we still don't think that the whole thing is fair, and by our standards it certainly isn't. But let me tell you something else that wasn't fair. It really wasn't fair that Jesus, a sinless man, go to the cross for your sins and for mine. Yet, that is precisely what happened. You see, we live in a world of tallies, and accounts, of debts owed and debts paid. We live in a world of boundaries and schedules, spreadsheets and bookkeeping, and of hourly wages.

The Kingdom of God is on another dimension one that turns our world upside down. But that is precisely why Jesus was so free. For when he chose to go to the cross for you and for me he didn't first ask the questions that we

would ask: do we deserve it and can we repay it. Because the answer to both questions is no.

The economics of the Kingdom of God are quite unlike the economics of the world. And, like Simon Peter, we bitterly complain about the unfairness of it all. We miss the point that if God had our tally book mentality, and went strictly by what is fair, then salvation would be out of the grasp of all.

The issue is not what is fair. The issue is: How can we bring more into the fields to serve. Why? In the words of Jesus: Because the harvest is great, and the laborers are few.

After serving as a missionary for forty years in Africa, Henry C. Morrison became sick and had to return to America. As the great ocean liner docked in New York Harbor there was a great crowd gathered to welcome home another passenger on that boat. Morrison watched as President Teddy Roosevelt received a grand welcome home party after his African Safari.

Resentment seized Henry Morrison and he turned to God in anger, "I have come back home after all this time and service to the church and there is no one, not even one person here to welcome me home."

Then a still small voice came to Morrison and said, "You're not home yet."

We have a reward coming! We have a reward coming. But not in this world. You see the economics of the kingdom of God are different the economics of the world. Were not home yet.

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