

Fairness and Grace

According to my desk calendar, autumn arrived a couple of days ago. Fall has only just begun. The holy seasons of Advent and Christmas are still months away. But they'll be here before we know it! In the Charles Schulz classic, "A Charlie Brown Christmas," Charlie Brown's little sister, Sally, asks him to write a letter to Santa Claus for her. So he writes while Sally dictates. And here's what she says:

"Dear Santa, how are you? How is your wife? I have been extra good, so I have a long list of presents that I want. Please note the size and color of each, and send as *many* as possible. If it seems too complicated, just send cash. Preferably tens and twenties."

At this point, Charlie Brown throws up his hands and cries, "Arggghh! Even my baby sister's gone commercial!"

And Sally replies, "All I want is what I have coming to me. All I want is my fair share."

I think that pretty early in life, we develop a sense of what's fair and unfair, a sense of entitlement to everything we think we have coming to us.

And that probably hasn't changed much in the time since, after the exodus, God's people Israel complained in the wilderness. That probably hasn't changed much in the two thousand years since Jesus shared this story about a vineyard owner whose grapes are at risk of rotting on the vines, if they're not harvested just as soon as possible.

So at first light, this landowner goes down to the village square. Where a group of day laborers has gathered, looking for gainful employment so their families won't go to bed hungry that night. Hoping for a chance to earn the usual daily wage. Now, nobody needs to tell Jesus' first hearers what the usual daily wage is. It's a denarius. One little silver coin. Smaller than this dime. A denarius is barely enough for a family to subsist on for one day.

These laborers are the working poor. Like so many of today's families who scrape by from paycheck to paycheck—if they're fortunate enough even to *have* jobs—these first-century workers live from denarius to denarius.

These workers in Jesus' parable. The first group of workers gets hired at six o'clock in the morning for the usual daily wage. They know they'll be toiling in the vineyard all day under a hot Palestinian sun. Toiling until quitting time—six p.m. That's a

twelve-hour shift. But they're happy to have the work. In the morning, they're not thinking too much about fairness. They're not thinking too much about the fact that while *they* were hired, many others waiting around the square were not.

But the day is just beginning. For reasons known only to the vineyard owner, he doesn't hire all the help he needs at the same time. He comes back at mid-morning to hire more workers. And then again at noon. And once again in mid-afternoon.

Finally, at five, he returns to the marketplace. To those laborers who've been waiting all day. To those who have not yet been hired. To those who are losing hope of being able to put bread on their family's table this night. But to their surprise, the landowner recruits them to go to the vineyard.

Then, after working till six—just for an hour—they're surprised again when they get called to the front of the line and get paid first. But that surprise can't match their joyful astonishment when the payroll guy slips a full day's pay into their palms for only one hour's work.

Now the twelve-hour workers, lined up behind them, see what's going on. And they can't believe their eyes. A whole denarius for these sorry bums? Hey—maybe we'll get *twelve*

denarii—one for each hour we worked! But no. Each of them gets the same amount as the latecomers. Just the one denarius. They're outraged. It's not fair!

Angrily, they confront the boss: *Excuse me? They're getting the same as us? We who slaved and sweated and sweltered in this heat from sunup to sundown? You're paying these layabouts who worked only one hour a whole denarius just like us?*

Those who've labored long and hard are so filled with jealousy and resentment that it's somehow slipped their minds that they agreed to work for the usual daily wage. The boss has to remind them that he's kept his part of the bargain. He's given them exactly what he promised.

What the six a.m. workers can't bear is that the vineyard owner has made the latecomers *equal* to them who have labored all the day long. They grumble. They grouse. *It's not fair!*

And, under the circumstances, don't you and I tend to empathize with these workers?

We are, after all, surrounded by—conditioned by—a culture that's all about getting fair compensation. All about getting our just desserts. All about getting what we have coming to us. We live in

the midst of a culture in which the first are first and the last are last. Period.

You might remember a TV commercial in which the new kid on the block gets an ice cream cone, and another kid, who's been there a while, doesn't get one. The point of the ad is that it's not fair. We get indignant at unfairness, just like these workers in Jesus' parable.

The thing is, my brothers and sisters, we too are vineyard workers. In the New Testament, the vineyard is a metaphor for God's present and coming reign, of which the church is an earthly foretaste. So we who are the church—we who have *been* the church for a long time—may identify with these laborers and put ourselves in their shoes.

We may have been at work for years. Or decades. Maybe all our lives. Although it's not easy for us to admit, we may consider ourselves “insiders” and feel resentful of those we consider “outsiders”—relative newcomers who've arrived later. We've labored long and hard, and they just got here. We're first. And they're last. How can they be promised the same payoff, the same reward for which we've served the kingdom? We grumble. We grouse. *It's not fair!* Don't we deserve more?

Do you think that what bugs us is that these others have been made equal to us? Does it get under our skin that what we're receiving is offered to them as well? In our heart of hearts, do we desire grace for ourselves, but not for them?

Could Jesus' disciples—including you and me—be the ones he's talking to in this story of vineyard workers? His parable is a prism through which we see the ways of God's kingdom, so that we can be freed from bondage to the world's values. So that we can begin to grasp the truly radical nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who overturns the assumptions and the presumptions of a society that focuses on status and position and on you-get-what-you-deserve.

As a member of one church observes, "When our preoccupation is our just desserts, we lose touch with a sense of [all that we've received]."

When all we're thinking about is fairness, our memories grow short. We forget that when grace is expected, when grace feels deserved, it stops being grace.

When all we're thinking about is fairness, our memories grow short. "We forget [about] the people who love us more than we deserve."

When all we're thinking about is fairness, our memories grow short. We forget that God doesn't keep score or keep books on you or on me.

Which fills me with gratitude. Because—speaking personally—I didn't get what I deserved. As a sinner, I didn't get what I had coming to me. Instead, I received the undeserved pardon, mercy, and forgiveness that God offers to every one of us. That is, grace.

Grace poured out by this God who invites you and me to work in the vineyard of God's reign. We know that this work doesn't save us. We know there's nothing we can do to *earn* the grace of God. We know there's nothing we can do to *deserve* the grace of God. But you and I are being saved by that measureless grace.

And we are being saved through faith alone.

Jesus uses this story to teach us something about faith. In the end, it doesn't matter when we come to faith. It doesn't matter whether we come in the early morning of this life, or in the middle, or in the evening. Or even in its final moments. All that matters is that we come.

All that matters is that we come to this God who, time after time, surprises us. The first surprise is that God loves us. The

second surprise is that we can never even begin to understand *how much* God loves us. The third surprise—and maybe this is the one we struggle with—is that God’s reckless, relentless, limitless love is for all.

We’ve been with God all this time. Don’t we want our relationship with God to be special? To be personal? To be unique? Truly, it is all of these. But our God longs to be in loving relationship with *all* God’s children. We know it’s true, because this exceedingly generous God touches each one with grace. The first. And the last. The lifelong believer. And the eleventh-hour believer. Yes, and even grumbling, grouching, and complaining believers!

For when this gracious God calls you and me into God’s vineyard, calls us to fruitful labor, each and every vine we tend is deeply rooted in grace. Grace for every one of us. Grace abundant beyond imagining. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.