

You've probably seen and heard complaints about megachurch pastors who live in lavish mansions and fly on private jets, or cult leaders who amass immense fortunes. When people make that complaint in my presence, I sometimes lament, "Yeah... I must be doing something wrong." But only if I'm confident that they will take it as a joke, which I intend for it to be. To be even more clear, while evangelism is important to me, and I believe it should be important to every Christian, I do not want to be a megachurch pastor or a cult leader. I do not envy them or covet their lifestyles. I love being a priest in the Episcopal church too much, even on the hard days. Our traditions are important. They make us who we are, and challenge us to imagine who we could be.

Material things matter, but true satisfaction comes from other places. Jonah was angry and disappointed that after he risked his life by bringing an unpopular message to Nineveh, God didn't carry out his threat of destroying the city, but God never *wanted* to destroy Nineveh; God wanted its people to change their ways, and apparently their animals, too. But rather than condemn Jonah for his vindictiveness, God uses the bush to teach Jonah about God's sovereignty. God uses his sovereignty for grace, and in different ways deals graciously with both the Ninevites and Jonah. On the other hand, Paul gets it. He wants to help his congregations thrive, but not to make Paul look good, and certainly not for any material gain. All Paul wants for himself is to be with Jesus, but he puts the needs of the church ahead of his personal desire, telling the community that his idea of success is that Christians live "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ," that is, with faithfulness and grace.

In today's gospel, Jesus drew on the tradition of describing Israel as God's vineyard, which was at least as old as Isaiah, but applies it to a new situation. Although his mission began with Israel, he intended for it to grow to include all nations, as the conclusion to Matthew's gospel makes abundantly clear. Modern interpretation tradition says that this parable was invented decades later to address the divide between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians in the community Matthew was writing for, but that's not as certain as some would insist.

Jesus may have told this parable to address a concern in his own time, like people disapproving of his dealing graciously with sinners and people who couldn't work, like the blind, the sick, and the possessed. He may have anticipated the Jewish-gentile divide in the early church, or he may have simply understood human nature so well that he knew that every generation has people who grumble out of envy, covetousness, entitlement, or greed.

And it's true. Sometimes people on opposite sides of a divide envy each other! The grass is always greener on the other side. I've heard clergy who envy lay people and lay people who envy clergy — not a good look, on either side. It's commonly assumed that in the armed forces, people in the enlisted ranks always wish they were officers, but that's not true. I'm reminded of what retired General John Kelly said after he became Donald Trump's Chief of Staff, one of the most powerful people in the country. He said,

“After one week on this job, I believe the best job I ever had is as a sergeant in the Marine Corps.” Even in today’s parable, the ones who did a full day’s work envy the ones hired only for an hour, but few ever wonder what it might have been like for someone hired near the end of the day.

They would have spent most of that day growing ever more alarmed that they might not be able to feed themselves and their families, dreading not only hunger, but shame. And even when they were hired, they had no idea how much they would be paid, unlike the first-hired workers, who bargained with the landowner... you might even say, entering into a covenant with him. The last-hired might well have envied the first-hired, who didn’t have to worry!

But of course, this story isn’t really about the agricultural labor market. At the beginning, Jesus says it’s a simile for understanding what the kingdom of heaven is like. And of course, it’s not like human society, since if it were, there would be no need for a story. God’s ways can be hard to accept, so we need stories like this to help us see that God’s ways are better in the end.

The grumbling laborers aren’t necessarily bad people, and indeed, the landowner addresses one of them as “Friend.” He addresses their grievance honestly, but kindly and gently, quite unlike the king in last week’s parable who called his ungrateful servant “wicked” and had him tortured. Which is great news, because the grumblers are just like us, human beings who fall into thinking in worldly terms, who need the gentle correction of divine wisdom, the very people Jesus came to save.

The really funny thing, though, is that we’re also like the workers who were hired at the end of the day. Everyone has to struggle with uncertainty and the anxiety it brings, one way or another. So Jesus also reminds us here that “fair” and “right” are not necessarily synonyms. It would be fair to pay the last-hired workers a pittance that would ensure they and their families went hungry and were ridiculed, but certainly not right. God’s economy operates on grace, not maximizing advantage. And at a higher level, in a sense all Christians today are johnnies-come-lately to the kingdom of heaven. Our Christian forebears established much that we take for granted, and they in turn would have had nothing if the Jews had not first made their covenant with God.

We repeatedly ask God to give us our daily bread without thinking too much about whether we deserve better, worse, or indeed, anything at all. We ask God to make earth more like heaven without considering if we would like the changes. This parable should make us wonder if we are truly ready to pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” But even if we aren’t ready, there is hope. If the vineyard is God’s kingdom, the laborers are already there, despite their jealousy and entitlement. That’s kind of the point: requiring perfection of the laborers, in any form, would defeat the purpose of God’s grace and action.

God deals with both the early and the late workers with surprising grace. Rather than envying others, we might wonder what others could envy about us, and whether

we could help others have a better life. Rather than look for faults in others, and condemn them, we are better off looking for the grace of God, who forgives us, giving thanks for God's abundant and generous grace, and striving to be more gracious and forgiving ourselves. Imagine the joy of surprising others with our own grace and forgiveness. Or better yet, experience the joy.