

THE CURVE BALL

You could call today's parable a curve ball. We hear this story about a landowner and his day laborers. When he pays those who worked an hour the same as those who worked all day. You could call it outrageous. Those workers protest and we may find ourselves silently protesting with them thinking, that's not fair. And they're right. In terms of business, it isn't fair but the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus describes is not a business. The point of this parable isn't about just compensation—which is certainly an important point—but *not* the point here. Instead, it reminds us that the Kingdom of Heaven doesn't follow the logic of business but the logic of divine love; a different way of looking at things.

Commenting on this parable, Pope Francis remarked that we are all called to work for the Kingdom and the reward. Unlike hourly wages, it offers us eternal life. But when we work for the kingdom, it's not meant to be constricted labor or even hourly wages, but a matter of love. Something that follows the logic of love. The logic of love is interested in giving more than receiving. Or as the first reading tells us, God's ways aren't our ways. This says something about ourselves and our attitude. We work for money but we're to serve God out of love. When this curve ball is thrown, the logic of business may easily strike out but the logic of love might hit it out of the park.

The landowner asks four questions of his complaining workers and it's worthwhile to hear those questions asked of us.

Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? The answer would be yes. They had an agreement and the landowner is fulfilling it. So you technically, you can't say he's unfair but at the same time, it's also hard to imagine anyone wanting to work for him early the next morning. Those early workers feel entitled to more and in terms of business that might be true but there is no entitlement in the Kingdom of Heaven. There it's all gift.

What if I want to give this last one the same as you? It's hard to argue with that. God pays not with an amount that can be earned but with his grace. The gift of

new life in Christ, the gift of grace is something we receive but not something we can earn.

Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? That question is much like the previous one. Something to remember is that there's an urgency here. The time of the grape harvest is followed soon by the rainy season so it's imperative to get the crop harvested as soon as possible using as many people as possible even if only for an hour. Then as now, day laborers were at the bottom of the social order. They had no job security, certainly no benefits and could easily be subject to exploitation. Even slaves were considered to be members of the household and had some security. Day laborers were not.

Then as now, day laborers made meager wages at best. An hour's worth of work would earn next to nothing. The earlier workers had a verbal contract. There's no mention of this to the latter ones but he shows them some compassion. The daily wage was enough to live on for a day. Without it, a worker and his family might go hungry that night. So another way of looking at it is that this man is showing compassion and mercy that reflects the compassion and mercy of God.

Are you envious because I am generous? Sad to say but the answer can be yes. And let's be honest, sometimes we can all experience some envy and jealousy and it's not a good feeling. So this parable focuses first on the outrageous love of God but it also warns us about the danger of envy.

Envy and jealousy can drain us, consume us and bring us out of focus. They can be described as sadness or in this case anger, at the good fortune of others. Envy and jealousy cause us to compare ourselves to others and others to ourselves. If the disease is envy, the antidote is gratitude. Envy concentrates on what we don't have while gratitude concentrates on what we do have. When we find ourselves facing envy, it's good to make an act or several acts of thanksgiving for all the blessings we have received.

And if you're up for a challenge, someone has said to thank God for blessing that person with what it is you envy. For example, Thank God for giving that promotion to the person who got it rather than to you. So gratitude is an antidote to envy. So is generosity. Envy, like all sin, closes us in on ourselves. Gratitude can draw us out of ourselves; so can generosity.

Envy can certainly be found in church life, including in the clergy. Perhaps the Jewish Christians for whom Matthew wrote this gospel were envious of gentiles who they used to look down on as sharing in the promise perhaps thinking, *You have made them equal to us*. Church members who have been around for many years can feel threatened by newcomers to their parish, particularly if they look, talk or dress differently perhaps thinking, *You have made them equal to us*. Yet more people coming to church is a good thing. The church isn't called to be a small exclusive club but rather to reach out to everyone, to all nations as the risen Christ will say at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel.

The curve ball of this parable tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven doesn't follow the logic of business but the logic of love, of outrageous divine love. The love that finds its greatest expression through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, through his Paschal Mystery. As we share in the Eucharist, we share in that hour of Jesus' death and resurrection and here Jesus gives himself generously to us. This is neatly summed up by St. Paul when he says, *Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ*.

When Jesus gives himself so generously to us, let's not worry about what he gives to others which opens the door to envy, but rather with lives of intentional faith, realizing the depths of his love for us, may we concentrate on giving ourselves to him.