    I have to be honest, this parable leads me to declare, *"It is not fair!”*  The late comers in the story did not earn or deserve the wages they were given. It is not fair to those workers who worked long and hard.

You know, we often see the world around us through the lens of *fairness* rather than *grace*. What if we try to interpret this parable through the lens of God, and thus the lens of Grace? We have been taught from an early age that fairness matters. Watch a bunch of children play and it will not be long before we hear someone say, *“That’s not fair!”*

What if part of the lesson here is that life simply isn’t fair? Perhaps we want to believe in a God who would make things “fair” or “just” – but if we set that preference aside, we see that perhaps a different order of things prevails. What can we learn from this that is beyond “fairness?”

It’s not just children. Adults want fairness too. Too often, however, fairness rather than love, acceptance, mercy, forgiveness, or generosity is the measure by which we act and judge another person or life circumstances.

    We like fairness, I think, because it gives us some assurance of order, predictability, and control; even if it is a false assurance. Fairness is based on what we deserve, how hard we work, what we achieve, and the way in which we behave. Sometimes it is fair to give a reward and at other times a punishment. We live in and promote a society in which we earn what we get. We deserve the consequences of our actions, good or bad.

    What happens though when Divine goodness outdoes human fairness? Notice that in today’s parable wages and grace stand in opposition to each other. They are two opposing world views. When we clamor for fairness, it often allows little room for grace.

Grace reverses “*business as usual*”. As scripture reminds us, *“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”* That is not how our society works. The world says the “*last are last and the first are first”* because they deserve it. It is what is fair.

Our understanding of fairness, however, does not seem to have priority in God's realm where grace is the rule not the exception. Grace looks beyond our productivity or our appearance.  It recognizes there is more to us than our accomplishments or our failures.  It is also not predictable. It, like God, can be mysterious. The parable makes us pause. What is expected doesn’t happen. Therefore, Grace, too, is unpredictable.

Grace reveals the goodness of God. Grace seeks unity and inclusion. What we have accomplished or earned makes distinctions and has the tendency to separate. On the other hand,Grace just happens! What we get or have achieved is based on merit. Here, there is no “*level playing field.”* It doesn’t make sense! It is beyond ‘sense.’ Perhaps the parable points us to a way of interpreting the order of things that is beyond reason: the realm of Love, Compassion and Grace.

You see, the only precondition of Grace is that we show up and open ourselves to receive what God is giving. When we do that we see the world around us differently.

    I know of an attorney who lives in two worlds.  At worship he hears about Grace and at work he is reminded that he lives by a score card. He will tell you that every partner in his firm has to record the number of hours they worked, the number of hours billed, and the number of dollars collected. It is the basis for their salaries and a method in comparing competing results.

One of his partners, after comparing his stats with the other partners, declared to one of his close colleagues, *“It is not fair.  I want to be paid what I am worth.”*

    Well, as time went on his productivity and results took a drastic down turn. Then he got quiet and did not say much about it. After a few days his close colleague asked him, *“So have you talked to the other partners about being paid what you are worth?”*  He hesitated for a moment and said, *“That was the dumbest idea I’ve ever had, what if they agree? What if they actually pay me what I am worth? I would be taking a pay cut!”*

    Grace reminds us that we are not nearly as self-sufficient, deserving, or independent as we would like to believe. Neither is our worth determined by our productivity or usefulness.

    The tragedy of a deeply competitive and judgmental environment is that it can often blind us from the presence and Grace of God.  It can make us resentful of Grace, goodness, and beauty in the gifted life of another. It separates and isolates us from others.

It can also make us think that our true worth resides in the external: our possessions, our pay, and our achievements. Not that these things can’t be important too – but perhaps this story is reminding us of a deeper worth that is unseen…a basic humanity that is impervious to external circumstances.

Eventually we set up standards and expectations not only for ourselves and others but for God. That is what happened to those first hired workers in today’s parable. They saw themselves as different from and more deserving than those hired later in the day. They grumbled against the landowner saying, *“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us.”*

The truth is they are not that different from each other. Neither group owned the vineyard. Both groups needed a job and both groups were chosen, invited in, by no effort of their own doing. There is, however, something that distinguishes the first hired-hands and those hired later on.

The distinction is not what time they showed up to work. The real distinction between those first hired and all the later hired ones is the terms under which they entered the vineyard. The first hired entered the vineyard only after agreeing to the usual daily wage.

However, the landowner is willing to pay more than the usual daily wage--a full day’s wage for less than a full day’s work!   *“That’s not fair,” we* might say as the workers did. No, it is not. That is the mystery of grace!

The first hired-hands got what they bargained for. The later hired workers, those who come at 9:00 a.m., noon, 3:00 p.m., even 5:00 p.m., did not, however, negotiate for the usual daily wage. They entered the vineyard trusting they would be paid *“whatever is right.”*

    “*Whatever is right*” is not determined by the first hired workers but by the goodness of the landowner. These later hired laborers received more than they earned, more than they deserved, more than they had a right to ask or hope for. That is just what God does. *“Whatever is right”* is not about fairness but about Grace!

    Maybe we need to be reminded not to compare ourselves and our lives to others.  When we do this we will create room for Grace to emerge.

What if we tried to create a “*win-win*” situation in the workplace or in our day-to-day relationships?  And what would happen if we stopped placing unrealistic expectations on ourselves and others?

As we contemplate this parable, may we remember to open our eyes to the mystery of Grace.

* May we remember that God works in mysterious ways.
* May we trust a process greater than ourselves, even when things don’t seem “fair.”
* May we honor ourselves and one another regardless of external achievements.
* May we find worth, and appreciation, no matter what.
* May we still aspire to be just and fair in our own actions – trusting in the Grace of God that can embrace us all, especially when we are open and willing to receive.

Finally, with God’s help, if we could begin to think and act in these ways, our lives would be God-filled and we would look a lot like the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, here and now. Amen.