

In today's gospel parable, about the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus is once again addressing the self righteous Pharisees who are questioning Jesus' association with prostitutes and tax collectors. They expect the prophet to only associate with God-fearing, faithful Hebrews. After all, in their view, only the Jews deserve Jesus' attention because only the Jews have put in the long days of labor, obediently preparing for the Messiah. Jesus spending time with sinners instead of devoted Jews must seem to them to be unfair. So Jesus shares today's parable and its lesson with them.

Our Gospel today asks a question: 'Is it fair that those who toiled for several hours should receive the same wage as those who only worked for one hour?' For most of us, at least subconsciously, our reaction is that the landowner was unfair. Those who worked the whole day are depicted as being envious and jealous of those who arrived last, even though there's no apparent reason to chastise the late comers. There is no indication that those hired last were lazy, or didn't want to work or for that matter expected to be paid a full day's wage. Those who came last were simply the beneficiaries of the Landlord's generosity. And yet, even when the landowner asserts that he should be free to be generous with whomever he wants, many of us would think: Okay, so be generous with me too! Where's mine!

Gifts rarely seem fair. How many parents have lamented over birthday gifts or Christmas presents for their children only to hear choruses of: "that's not fair, he or she got more than me." Much in the same way that those who labored all day for vineyard owner didn't think it was fair that those who worked much less received equal reward.

We've all been brought up in a society that tells us that we get what we earn. We reap what we sow, the harder we work, the more we will be rewarded. And while these may be wise axioms for this earthly life, these philosophies simply ignore the reality that heaven is not earned. These mottos for getting ahead fail to recognize that heaven is not a reward but rather, heaven is a gift.

Can you imagine reaching heaven and discovering that things aren't as you expected them to be? What if you reached heaven and found your next store neighbor was Saddam Hussain or Adolf Hitler? Or perhaps even more unbelievable, what if you couldn't find that beloved grandparent, or aunt or uncle that you were sure you would one day join. Now, I'm not predicting either scenario but I do think that we're in for some big surprises if we're fortunate enough to pass through the pearly gates. Afterall, I seriously doubt that many of us would have expected to find the penitent thief from Calvary in paradise before Jesus shared the gift of his salvation from the cross.

Turns out Jesus is a great gift giver and we don't have to wait until our passing from this life to enjoy many of those gifts. For in addition to Salvation, Jesus also offers us the gift of the sacraments. And while each of the sacraments offers life-changing grace, the gift of the Eucharist unites us with Christ as closely as we can be united with him in our mortal existence. Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist as spiritual nourishment because he loves us. By eating his Body and drinking his Blood, we become united to him. As Jesus said in the Bread of Life discourse, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him" (John 6:56). God pledges the gift of standing by our side in this life as well as in the next, whether we deserve it or not.

Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of Heaven offer all of us some surprises and perhaps heaven might not even seem very fair. But the fact is that none of us is worthy of God's love and the favor of his gifts. God judges us not by some system

of merit or by what we have accomplished or appear to have accomplished. Our Lord ultimately judges us by what is in our hearts. And even then, he welcomes us into his kingdom, not out of obligation, but out of compassion and love.

There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. In turn, we are called to live our lives, as best we can, in imitation of Christ. Not out of expectation of reward, but as **our gift** to him who loves us and gives us so much. And frankly, sometimes our gift simply isn't adequate, but fortunately for us, God's gifts to us are always more than we deserve. In some ways, that just doesn't seem very fair – but then again, generous gift giving rarely does.