

When this parable was written, “the usual daily wage” was one denarius—not great pay, but considered fair for a day’s work as a hired hand. Following the custom of the day, the landowner negotiated with hired workers in the morning and settled on a mutually agreeable wage. The workers went out to the vineyard and did the work they agreed to do. When the landowner paid them the accepted wage, the whole arrangement was fair and socially just. If the landowner in Jesus’ parable had not hired other workers that day, this story would be only marginally interesting. Maybe.

But the landowner *did* hire other people. Not just one more group, but four more times that day—at nine, noon, three and five—the landowner went and found more workers and hired them. The promise to the late-comers was that they would be paid “whatever may be considered right.” Labor unions would be all over this practice, wouldn’t they? But that’s not the strangest hiring practice going on. The landowner had already hired people to do the work that there was to be done that day. So hiring one more group of people—let alone *four* more groups—is beyond redundant. On top of all that, to pay them all the same amount at the end of the day...well, it’s no wonder that people are grumbling. This behavior is just odd and it does feel a little unfair and, frankly, it’s bad management. Can you just imagine the lawsuits and strikes if this were to happen over at Chateau St. Michelle next week?

In more than 20 years of consulting, I have noticed something about human nature in organizations: arguments about money are almost never really about money. More often than not, centering an argument on money distracts people from the real issue—typically, one that’s harder to talk about. The laborers who worked first and longest, but who are paid last, complain about the money. But notice: what actually stings is not the amount of money—what they actually care about is a sense of fairplay. The landowner’s payment scheme has upset their assumptions about what is fair. The experience of all the workers probably confirms that, in a world of limited resources, abiding by the accepted social rules for fairness is the way to sort out how those limited resources should be distributed. “You have made them equal to us,” they complain, these workers who have undeniably worked harder and longer than those who showed up at the end of the day. “You have made them equal to us,” they say as though the injustice was apparent—as though the landowner shares the same set of assumptions.

But what if the landowner is working with a different set of assumptions? What if, in the landowner's mind, the resources are not limited? What if the landowner assumes infinite resources?

Exploring the infinite is a voyage into paradox. The quest began, at least in the recorded history of the ancient Mediterranean, at least 500 years before the common era and has been the subject of philosophers and mathematicians ever since. In the worlds of both mathematics and theology, the notion of infinity makes it possible to add as many additional people as you want to an already full house. Mathematicians and theologians using the notion of infinity can quite easily show that there must be something larger than infinity, while maintaining that infinity is that which is the largest. Similarly, infinity can be divided an infinite number of times with each division resulting in an infinity. Truly, a voyage into paradox.

For the ancients, infinity was a negative and something less than perfection. Infinity was the unbounded, indistinct, indefinite chaos from which creation was formed. But Matthew's Jesus, who is consistently interested in fulfillment—in the coming reign of heaven, uses this parable to point to God's already present and yet-to-come heaven that transcends human norms and priorities. God tames chaos in the on-going act of creating. "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner" who behaves like God who loves each of us and all of creation infinitely. God's love does not divide, distribute or even differentiate based on length of service or on superiority of performance. God's loving grace, being infinite, is beyond our ability to conceive of it let alone do anything to either earn or diminish it.

Because each of us and every other human is created in God's own image, God's infinite and loving grace creates solidarity. That solidarity is why we pray for "*our* daily bread," not "*my* daily bread." To say that God's loving grace is infinite means that, in one sense, our daily bread is actually sufficient. Just enough and not too much, given to us by a God who asks "Are you envious because I am generous?" God's infinite grace is the counterpoint to the injustices that are inherent in human social systems. Life is not fair, and yet when you and I choose to be fair with each other, both of us and those around us taste a little of God's character. In those moments, we offer each other and those with whom we come in contact a glimpse of the reign of God in which "the first will be last and the last will be first."

Within the embrace of God's infinite love, that phrase—"the first will be last and the last will be first"—points to the coming reign of heaven that the

complaining workers cannot yet see. “The first will be last and the last will be first” does not involve some kind of reordering based on relative merit. No, in the coming reign of heaven, God is utterly demolishing these categories. The first and the last both receive infinitely. God loves both loved equally and fairly. Half of infinite love is still infinite. One quarter of infinite love is still infinite. One hour of infinite love is still infinite.

Being created in God’s own image also means that each one of us is utterly and entirely God’s—all that we are and all that we have, even the painful and mysterious—belongs to God. Benedictines are taught that everything we work with, including our bodies, are to be treated as though they were vessels of the altar because we are obliged to offer all that we are and all that we have back to their proper owner: God. Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner suggested that not only are we all the late-comers one who receive the full daily payment of one denarius, and that we ourselves *are* the denarius. “For we receive ourselves,” Rahner wrote, “with our destiny, with our freedom certainly and whatever we choose to do with that freedom, but ultimately what we receive is ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

We are caretakers, not owners, of our lives and everything that is given under our care, including each other. That is the Christian way of life. Bp. Ricketts recently referred to this way of life as one that is lived “around something that is far beyond our possessions and our status”; a life that results in “liberation and deep sense of purpose.” Perhaps this deep purpose includes living into our given selves with gratitude; giving back to God by living for others *as* “the mysterious and gradually revealed gift of the eternal generosity of God.”

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<sup>1</sup> From Karl Rahner, S.J., “The Great Church Year.”