

There were four of us kids growing up in the Nagel household, and my parents regularly put us to work to keep the house and lawn up. There was so much to do. But how to assign the jobs so we weren't always whining about who had to work the most? As a family, we came up with THE SYSTEM. My parents would make the list of all the jobs that needed to be done that day, but then we kids would work together to divide the chores into four groups of equal difficulty. Next, each kid would roll the dice. The highest number got to pick his or her group of chores first, then the second, etc. It worked. We still complained THAT we had to work, but not that my parents were unfair.

I approved of the System. If I can honk my own horn, I had a big part in developing it! It was fair. It was orderly. It was the way the world should operate all the time. But as useful as that system was in keeping the peace in our family, my point is – it is nothing at all like the Kingdom of God! As the Gospel parable today teaches – that concept of fairness is completely foreign to God. That sounds troubling, doesn't it?

“So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner.” That grumbling is precisely why the landowner, representing Jesus, paid the last hired workers first: to provoke the rest into seeing in a new way. Jesus wants to teach us that in His Kingdom we’re not true subjects of Christ the King as long as we insist on our rights against others, no matter how fair that seems. In other words, Jesus doesn’t use THE SYSTEM! He’s not fair.

The evening payment of the workers in the parable represents our final judgement when God will judge us using a very simple law: His unconditional love for all. But how we resist that law! Erasmo Leavi-Merikakis has written concerning our resistance, “Comparison of self with others, self-interested calculation, sliding scales based on relative standards . . . [and] that most indestructible of all principles of ego, ‘Under no circumstances must I allow myself to be cheated out of what is my due,’: these are the criteria for judging good and evil” that lurk in

our hearts no matter what our class, race, or background. This worldly wisdom teaches it's a jungle out there, so I have to get mine.

Jesus, the landowner, understands this way of thinking of ours. But He has come to deliberately overthrow it, because it's completely incompatible with His Kingdom, ruled by God's unconditional love for all. The World and God's Kingdom are so different because justice in this world is based on getting what we deserve, while the Kingdom of Heaven is a place operating under a grace that nobody can ever deserve or earn. Before God's mercy all people are alike, redeemed sinners, equally powerless, and equally valuable. Why some are hired early and some late, why some seem more important or blessed than others: all these questions that consume our human calculations and philosophies here and now, are, in God's Kingdom, simply washed away by the ocean of His grace.

The workers who are hired first complain to Jesus/the Landowner about the late-comers, "You have made them equal to us." But Jesus is

not impressed with such claims of moral and social priority, or even difference. Behind the first workers' claim for justice lurks a deeper objection. Our individual identities are often dependent on separating ourselves from others. We look for ways we are different and more worthy than others, because the World's great lie is that life's a zero-sum game where there's not enough happiness for everybody. So, I have to win my share, even if that means you have to lose. Therefore, I'm continually looking around. Am I getting enough? Do you have more? Are the jobs on the chore-list equal? Is it fair?

My family's system of dividing chores may have been successful in its limited scope, but it wasn't a good preparation for heaven. I still struggle with the Law of that Kingdom. I still want to live most of the time by THE SYSTEM – by worldly fairness. But then, that's because when I hear this parable, I tend to assume that I'm one of the workers hired in the first hour. So, I get to judge God's treatment of me, and think, "Who are you, God, to pretend we human beings are equal when

we're so obviously in different categories? How dare you love those people without them having worked hard enough to earn it?" I spend more time judging God's lack of fairness than I do thinking about God judging me some day on His Law of Love.

"My Friend, I am not cheating you . . . am I not free to do as I wish with my own?" The whole point of this homily has been simply that The Kingdom of Heaven is very strange and doesn't pretend to conform to our ideas of fairness. We're quite correct to feel God's not acting fairly in our lives. But despite our suspicions, Jesus doesn't break the rules by His law. In His Kingdom He surpasses the rules. He wants to give us ultimately more than what's fair. And we still resist Him. "What's wrong with the system?" we demand.

What's wrong is that the system is not enough. The Kingdom's law will change everyone who tries to live in it. That is the Gospel message's power. That's why the saints seem both so strange, and so attractive, to us. Even now, they're living in a completely different Kingdom, by a

different law than the rest of us do. But until we start living under the law of the Kingdom of Heaven we can't experience its freedom – and so we'll continue to assume it means only our worldly loss, when in reality it's an ocean of grace waiting to cover us.