

We've all done it. We've all been there. We all know how to make our righteous indignation boil over. "It's not fair"!

The point is that God doesn't just love and care for those we think he ought to. He doesn't share our lines of demarcation, which label some (usually including ourselves) who are "deserving" and those who are decidedly not.

As Jesus started living out and teaching this truth, much to the disgust of the religious leaders, it's hardly surprising that the religious leaders of the day thought they knew better how a prophet ought to be spending his time.

Time and again in his teaching, Jesus tries to help us grasp something of the nature of God's loving, which is so much wider and more far-reaching than we seem to understand. Today's parable of the hired workmen is a case in point.

The first lot are happy to agree to a day's wage, but they cannot cope with the employer being generous to those who started work near the end of the day. Naturally, it's not those who were paid first who complain, but those who see the arrangement as a raw deal for themselves and resent it.

They whine and complain to him that they did not get equal pay for equal work, that this was not a conventional practice.

But the landowner retorts,

Did I do you wrong?

Did you not get what we agreed upon?

Did I cheat you out of something? Take what's yours and go.

I choose to give to this last group the same as I give to you.

And here's the punch line: the owner says: "Are you envious because I am generous?"

This parable is situated right in the middle of a larger portion of material where Jesus is conversing with his disciples. Jesus is not speaking to the religious leaders here, those outside of his circle. He is speaking to his followers.

No matter how many times Jesus says it, the disciples just cannot seem to get it in their heads: God is good. There's enough goodness to go around, therefore there is no room for anxiety or competition to get more than the next person.

Jesus is teaching his disciples to take care with regard to jealousy and its sister emotion, envy, because these emotions pose a threat to one's own health, and to the health of a community.

If our basic reckoning in life is simply what we're worth on an hourly rate, then the longest working labourers have a point.

But the owner is looking at it quite differently, and sees the holistic needs of all the men in the market-place, just as God sees all people with their needs and is concerned to provide for them all.

Whenever we see God's generosity in evidence, however much of a surprise it is in view of our perceived suitability of the recipient, we have no right to question or quibble, but should be rejoicing with the angels at the amazing love of God.

Throughout history jealousy and envy have often been used interchangeably and their descriptions are legion – indicating how complicated it is to use language to define these two emotions.

But you know them when you feel them. Jealousy and envy can boil up and foment and churn us inside. They are physical emotions, raw. For our purposes: "jealousy", I'd suggest, comes from a place of fear when we feel the threat of losing something or someone we hold precious; whereas "envy" comes from a place of longing and desire, when we wish we had what someone else has.

Jealousy and envy are dangerous to relationships. They work their way into the heart and soul and can drive a wedge between siblings, loved ones, friends, and colleagues.

But we are reluctant to admit to jealousy to ourselves, to others, because it's a feeling that we do not like the world to see. We pretend we don't feel them because jealousy and envy might be the most painful feelings we humans experience. We are embarrassed or ashamed. They are so deep in us, they make us ache; and, left unguarded, can foster destructive behaviour. No wonder they are considered Deadly Sins.

Comparing ourselves to others, or calculating how we have been cheated, is a lose-lose game. There will always be someone better off: prettier, more handsome, richer, cleverer, funnier, more athletic, more creative, a better singer, a better parent, kinder, have better clothes, more shoes, a nicer house and so on, and so on.

We do it as churches, too....St So-and-so's down the road has got a much better hall, better parking, better facilities generally – it's no wonder they have so many more people than us....poor us!

This is both pointless and also destructive of one's self, as individuals and as communities, because it saps energy and prevents the positive exercise of discipleship...

So, practically, how does one keep from becoming shackled by jealousy or envy?

I think gratitude and rejoicing with others is an antidote. Having a glad heart as the Psalmist says, is an antidote. Gratitude jar.

Jesus says, effectively, stop getting distracted by looking around to see what others have or don't have. Put on your spiritual blinkers and take seriously your own call to the work God has given you— with the gifts you have been given; and that applies to church communities, just as much as to individuals.

Returning to our parable, I'd say that I also suspect that, if the laborers had known the landowner well enough, they would not have been surprised by the "inequity" of the pay. They would have expected him to do something just like that because he was just that kind of person! He was always compassionate to the poor. He was always going out looking for those who needed work.

The lesson of this parable is that our God is a good and generous God; and that, rather than being envious of what God has given others, we should be grateful for what He has given us and do our best with that, so that the Kingdom virtues of compassion and generosity are made manifest through us.