

Enough

You gotta love the Israelites in today's first lesson.

Here they are, having just been rescued from a slave's life in Egypt, having just gone through the fantastic plagues sent by God to wake up Pharaoh: locusts, frogs, rivers running blood red, and then, most stunningly, the passing over and safeguarding of the Israelite shanties and their children while the Egyptian mansions find their first born destroyed.

Very powerful stuff.

Yet here they stand today, asking that most human of questions of God; the question I'll bet you and I ask more than we care to admit:

"That's all well and good, God, but what have you done for me lately?"

The grumbling, once they are free, begins almost immediately.

"Better off as slaves!"

"Who is this Moses character anyway?"

And finally:

"Feed me!" they say as if with one voice.

Learning about a free life in service to the creator of all things will take much time, and the pruning of many people in their attitudes and understanding of life.

But, today, everyone must eat.

And they are fed.

With manna and quail, quail being the wilderness version of roast chicken.

They are fed every day their daily bread.

“Don’t hoard it,” God tells them.

If you hoard it, the manna will rot.

Instead, trust that today you will be filled, and tomorrow too, not by your planning and schemes, but by God’s grace.

I think Jesus had this story in mind when he tells us the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

When you first hear it, the story seems totally unfair.

Some work all day long, others for less than an hour.

Yet, the latecomers are made equal to the ones who are there since dawn.

That’s not fair!

That’s not right!

Except when you stop and think about it.

Because the early birds agreed to the usual price: the daily wage, and that’s what they get.

That denarius was the daily wage back then.

It fed a family just enough for a day.

Anything less, the family went to bed hungry.

So in the parable, everyone gets enough for his daily bread, whether they worked all day for it or not.

And the early risers object.

They don't argue that the latecomers should get less; they argue that they themselves should get more.

In other words, the early risers feel entitled to receive "more than enough."

The concept of "enough" has a tough go of it in our world.

In a country where the national motto often seems to be "He who dies with the most toys wins," in a nation where we cannot muster the will to house our homeless families, but everywhere you look are enormous warehouses right downtown whose only function is to store our stuff, when 49 million Americans live below the poverty line; well, what does a Christian do?

This story recently ran in the newspaper:

"Do you want these? They are so fresh," says Catherine, holding up a bunch of grapes she just pulled out from one of the trash bags piled up on the sidewalk. "Take this, man. It's good too," adds her friend Morlan, holding out a loaf of bread.

Though happy to have found something for dinner, both Catherine, 21, and Morlan, 19, wonder why some edible food is thrown out as garbage in New York City.

"They only sell this food to the rich," says Catherine pointing to the upscale grocery store that put out the bags.

Inside the store, the manager is visibly upset with Catherine and other young people who are stuffing their backpacks with fruits

and vegetables from the trash bags. "They are picking up garbage," says the manager. "I don't know why they are doing this."

"I have zero cash right now, and no place to stay," Morlan said.

"What do you expect me to do?"

Such scenes are becoming increasingly commonplace on the streets of U.S. cities, despite the enormous quantity of food that the world's most affluent nation produces every year.

Official surveys indicate that every year more than 350 billion pounds of edible food is available for human consumption in the United States. Of that total, nearly 100 billion pounds, nearly a third, -- including fresh vegetables, fruits, milk, and grain products -- are lost to waste by retailers, restaurants, and consumers."

9/4/04, Inter-Press Service.

The truth is, this marvelous world, as God has given it to us, has enough for all of God's people.

Indeed, there is more than enough.

What today's parable calls us to is a surrender of our fears and anxieties that lead to the waste and hoarding and excess that so defines the world today, that so deprives others of their share in the bounty of God.

That surrender begins by doing the very simplest thing: it begins by paying attention to the miracle that is life on this planet.

In our scientific age, it seems so much is reduced to an explanation, and once explained, reduced to inconsequence.

A penitential prayer offered in Jewish homes at the start of Sabbath says this:

"Days pass and years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles."

And I think that's what Jesus is coaxing us to ponder with his upsetting parable today.

The early risers missed what was in front of their eyes: the grace they received was the invitation to work in the master's vineyard.

To work on behalf of the Kingdom of God is its own reward, since it is the work for which we were created from the very beginning of time.

To work in the fields of the Kingdom of God is to bathe in the grace of compassion, of kindness, of gentleness and of sharing.

Instead of welcoming that grace, the early risers clutch at their dollar; and by insisting on payment, stomp off without their reward.

It is said that in heaven and hell, all must eat with three-foot chopsticks.

In hell, they starve, because the sticks won't reach the mouth.

In heaven they feast, because everyone feeds each other.

Learning to live with one another, no matter when or how late each arrives, no matter from where each arrives, it is all vital training for living life in the kingdom of God.

Without that training here and now, when heaven *is* offered, some may walk away, because it's too strange a place to be.

Simone Weil said that: "God invites all the damned into paradise, but for them it is hell."

To prepare us for the Kingdom of God, Jesus invites us to wonder, in awe, at the abundance of God, the graciousness of God, the kindness of God.

Whether it is the rainbow that Noah sees as the sign of God's eternal covenant with humanity or the sweet air that we breathe or the miracle of plants growing to provide our food or the diversity and wonder of our sisters and brothers - lift up the veil and see the miracle of all that is - and in that seeing - in that believing - come face to face with the God who is always ready to give us enough.