

"I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." This sentiment, which can be found on several different kinds of bumper stickers, most likely resonates with a majority of American Workers, especially those stuck in rush-hour traffic on the way to work on a Monday morning. For many, work is a drudgery one must endure, rather than a vocation one can embrace.

Ok, so what's the biggest downer about going to work? Well, according to a recent survey, it's not about the money. In fact, wages appear well down the list of things that employees tend to gripe about. What really makes the workday a bummer for many is the fact that their employers don't listen to them, don't really know them, and don't take their input seriously.

Employees don't feel like they're invested in the company's mission and there's no sense of mutual benefit for employers and employees in determining goals and outcomes. In other words, employees don't feel as though they're part of a team -- they're only worker bees who do what's required. It's the kind of thing that makes an employee feel like an interchangeable part in a machine. You are what you produce.

And then there's the relative value of one employee to another. As job markets get tighter, and competition for jobs heats up, it's easy for workers to look around at other cubicles and compare themselves to their co-workers. That recent graduate occupying that neighboring desk might be making as much as you -- even though you have more experience -- or they may have the boss's ear in a way you never could. All of this doesn't seem fair at all.

And maybe that's what all this dissatisfaction is really about. We want what's coming to us, or at least what we perceive we are "owed" for our work in terms of influence, value, and compensation. Perhaps it's because that, for us Americans, it's all about fairness. We want to be valued in a fair way, equal to the standards and

rubrics applied to our co-workers, and we especially want those who write our reviews, and sign our checks, to appreciate us -- fairly.

A disgruntled worker reading the parable of today's gospel would likely see it as typical of the way the system works. You grind out a full day's work and some Johnny-come-lately gets the same wage as you do for a fraction of the labor. But, to read the parable that way, however, betrays some of the bias we have about ourselves and our relative worth in comparison to others. What Jesus is trying to teach us, however, is that real value isn't determined by things like one's resume, one's paycheck, or one's seniority on the job. In fact, it isn't too hard for us to imagine that in God's Kingdom real value isn't found by climbing to the top of the corporate ladder but is found by holding the ladder for others.

As we explore our parable this morning it might help us to take a brief look at its context found earlier in chapter 19. A rich young man comes to Jesus seeking assurance of eternal life. He's been a good boy, obeying all the commandments and he seems to believe that this alone should shoot him to the top of God's list of favorites. But Jesus crushes his sense of self-worth when he challenges the young man to "be perfect" by selling his possessions, giving the money to the poor and only then following Jesus. It's an invitation to downward mobility but, ironically, it's often within that downward mobility that true satisfaction and worth are found.

Jesus turns to his disciples and gives them the lesson that it's hard for the rich to enter God' kingdom because their worth is bound up in their possessions. A person might have the perfect spiritual resume, but until they are willing to be generous toward others, both physically and spiritually, then they will be outside the kingdom of heaven. For the disciples, who don't always appear to fully understand their teacher, this concept is a bit troubling because like many people in their day they most likely believed that wealth was a sign of God's blessing.

And yet Peter, always eager to demonstrate that he gets it, pipes up with the obvious question, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus assures him and the other disciples that their dispossession of family, job, wealth and status won't go unrewarded. But first they need to learn that in order to be first in God's world; you have to be willing to be last.

So now we arrive at today's story! To illustrate his point, Jesus tells the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. The harvest is ready and the landowner, serving as his own HR department, comes to the marketplace to do some hiring. He starts with the early birds who are likely the most eager workers and who probably have a good reputation for getting things done -- or they really need the money. They agree on a wage, and he sends them into the vineyard.

Still more workers are needed, so the boss returns to the employment office at 9 a.m., and again at noon, again at 3 p.m. and still again at 5 p.m. (Usually, work stopped about 6 p.m.) This last lot seems to have been a day late and a dollar short, given that they hadn't yet been hired after standing around idle all day. The assumption that Jesus' hearers would have, as would we, is that the laborers would each be paid by the hours they worked. After all, that's only fair.

When it's time for the denarii to be distributed (laborers would be paid at the end of each day), the landowner calls the manager of the vineyard and tells him to start settling the payroll with the last group hired. The shocking tale of the pay stub, however, is that they received a huge check for just one hour of work! This is exciting. You can imagine the murmur going through the line. If these ne'er-do-wells who were lucky to get hired at all, got this very generous amount for an hour of work, imagine what they will get for working three hours, six hours, and nine hours! Yet, as the other workers approach the paymaster, they hear disturbing news. Everyone, regardless of the hours they worked, is getting the same amount. Totally not fair!

I would guess at least a few of us might be able to empathize with the early bird group who, having heard what the others were getting, expected to be paid more since they provided more relative value than the others. What do they do? What would we do? Perhaps we would grumble and complain, or at the very least lodge a complaint, and that is what the people did. They filed their grievance with HR seeking restitution.

They saw their labor as being worth more than anyone else's, especially those who showed up last. But the landowner reminds them that they're getting exactly what they agreed upon first thing in the morning. It's the employer's prerogative to give whatever wage he wants to the others. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" he asks. "Or are you envious because I am generous?" Thus, says Jesus, "the last will be first and the first will be last."

According to a New Testament scholar Craig Keener, Jewish teachers used a similar parable to describe the day of God's judgment, but used it to make precisely the opposite point that Jesus was making. Israel, who had worked hard and been faithful for the long haul, would receive high wages while the Gentiles, who had come in much later, would receive little. Like the rich young man, many Jews believed that their spiritual resumes should give them priority status and a little extra for their faithful labor over time.

But Jesus reveals that God's economy doesn't work that way. God chooses to be generous and extend the same grace to the least and the last as God does to those who think they've earned it. In fact, in the next few verses, Jesus reveals just how far he will go to identify with the least and the last, giving himself over to both pious Jewish leaders and cruel Gentiles to die for them both.

Our take home for us today then, as disciples of Christ, is for us to never forget that following Jesus is to join him in the path of downward mobility. It means giving up our resumes, spiritual and otherwise, and recognizing our own

insufficiency and need for grace. It means laying aside our ambition for wealth and power and embracing a life of generosity, finding our satisfaction not in the wealth of our possessions but in the fewness of our wants. And it means understanding that our ultimate worth is found not in titles and power, but in our service to others.

If we're really working for Jesus, then we Christians should be among the most satisfied of workers, no matter what our earthly profession at which we toil on a daily basis. Whether we're digging ditches or leading a Fortune 500 company, our ultimate satisfaction is found in giving our lives away in the service of others. Think about it, what if we saw our jobs not as something to be endured, but as part of our vocation as followers of Jesus? What if we spent every day not comparing ourselves to others, but doing all in our power to lift others up?

Jesus calls us to be part of a team that always needs our input, our investment and our best -- and all for the glory of the rule of God. He invites us to consider the fact that joining his team and being an active participant no matter what our earthly profession, is the key to 100 percent satisfaction! And thanks be to God for that!