Prayer: Gracious God, may the words that I speak and our heart-felt reflections be pleasing to You, our Strength and our Redeemer. In Jesus’ name. Amen

A minister shared that near his home there is a shopping mall divided in two. The two sections are connected by a monorail because between them is a watercress farm. The farm owner didn’t wish to relocate it when the mall was built, and because he refused to sell his property, the mall developers worked around the farm by building the mall in two sections.

When the minister rides the monorail between the two mall sections, he notices people patiently working and tending the delicate plants. They grow in water, in a similar way as rice. The 1885 painting on the screen, entitled *Rice Gleaners*, by Angelo Morbelli, brings to mind the work of those water labourers. As you look at the image, consider what the workers on the watercress farm might be thinking about the people shopping all around them. Do they notice them, as they bend over to tend their plants?

Picture *yourself* bent over like the workers in the painting. *Stay* that way for a while. What does it *feel* like? As you stand up, how does your *back* feel? Can you imagine working like that *day* after *day*?

Remember a time when you did hard, manual labour all day. Maybe the next day you discovered muscles that you were not aware of, aching and reminding you of your hard work. Maybe you did similar work a second, third or *fourth* day, and rode those muscles through the pain.

How would it feel to work hard and have others come in, work less, and receive the *same* pay as you? Like the labourers in today’s Gospel story.
Jesus told a parable about a farmer who had some grapes to be harvested. The farmer went out early in the morning and hired some workers for his vineyard, agreeing to pay them the usual daily wage. Then he went out at 9:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. and did the same. Finally, one hour before quitting time, the farmer hired the remaining unemployed workers who had been standing around waiting for employment. *Who* were these labourers left at the end of the day, who hadn’t been hired? They are those no farmer wants to work his fields. Yet the boss hired them with only one hour left to work.

At the end of the work day, there was an accounting. Now the labourers will get their payment. The boss called in all the workers and the farmer paid all of them the usual daily wage, *even* those who only worked *one* hour. The workers who laboured all day were *shocked*. There were murmurs of injustice. They expected the boss to be *fair*, to recognize their labour with more pay. But the farmer owner asked, “*Why are you grumbling?* Can I not do as I wish with what is mine?”

Fair and unfair. From childhood through our senior years, we encounter numerous experiences where we quickly assess whether a situation is fair or unfair. When have you been tempted to get upset because someone else seemed to be getting something you thought they didn’t deserve?

A man told the story about his father, who had been married four times. The product of the first marriage was a girl who was released for adoption and raised by a stepfather. When she was about 50, her adoptive father died and she decided to search for her biological father, the man’s father. The man and his brother were not pleased about this. Here was this latecomer who arrived on the scene when the biological father was very elderly. Before long the biological father would pass away and there would be the reading of his will.

The man admitted to grumbling about this unknown half-sister showing up on the scene near the end of their father’s life, and to feeling right in the middle of the situation with no resolution in sight. He kept thinking,
“What just happened here? Who are you? What is this?” And the man realized that with regard to his father’s will, his father could very well say to his sons, “Can I not do what I wish with what is mine? Why are you grumbling?”

Fair or unfair?

Have a look at the 1888 painting on the screen, entitled The Red Vineyard at Arles, by Vincent van Gogh. There are twenty bent-over labours in a field, all collecting a harvest in baskets and loading it onto a horse cart. It’s dusk, the end of the workday. How are those labourers feeling? Exhausted, or satisfied that they have a job for that day? Are they feeling anxious over getting paid, and beginning to worry over tomorrow’s work- if there will be any at all? Hopefully there will be a few precious hours of rest.

Did you know that this is the only painting that Vincent van Gogh was ever paid for? His paintings today are worth millions of dollars, if they can be purchased at all. Yet he was given none of that.

Fair or unfair?

A church family worshiped in a school gym and saved their money for years in order to build a new building. As soon as the new building opened, the congregation tripled. New people streamed in and became active in the congregation. The long-time church people greeted the newcomers with very mixed feelings. They needed the new people to help pay the bills, to help keep up the heavy mortgage payments. They were glad the church was full. But deep in their hearts they were saying, “Where were you when we were struggling to build this church? For years you drove past the sign on the schoolyard and never came in. You are taking advantage of our hard work and dedication. You don’t deserve this.”

They didn’t say it very often. But the feelings were there, and every once in a while they’d emerge, “You didn’t pay the price.”

Fair or unfair?
How do you feel when you’ve been waiting in line for a table at a restaurant and a party who arrived there after you did gets seated first? Or when the promotion goes to the new kid on the block? Or if you discover that a new person doing a similar job to your own is paid a significantly higher rate?

Fair or unfair?

Yes, we understand exactly how those “all day” labourers in Jesus’ parable felt, and why they complained. This boss’s business strategy isn’t normal.

The farm owner’s equal pay for all the labourers, regardless of how long they worked baffles us because we have been trained to value fairness. In our world, “slackers” who sign on an hour before quitting time don’t deserve as much as regular staff who checked into work at the start of the day. Union grievance committees were created to combat preferential treatment.

This parable Jesus tells about the kingdom of heaven is counter to our expectations of the way the world works. We want the world to be fair because we want to receive good for the good we have done. If we work an hour, we ought to get paid for an hour. If we work overtime and go “beyond the call of duty”, we want to be remunerated accordingly.

But the point of Jesus’ parable has nothing to do with economics. It’s about God’s grace. Jesus says that it doesn’t matter when we are called. If we show up, we are given an equal share of God’s grace. The emphasis in the parable is not on what the workers deserve, but on what they need. Fairness means that everyone gets what he or she needs. God is gracious and kind even to those who don’t deserve such extravagant love.

All of us need God’s grace, as much as we can possibly get. None of us deserve more just because we have been long-time church members or do more to help others. We work in God’s vineyard because we have been called and chosen by God.
The gift is salvation and it is the same no matter when or how we come. We have equal access to God through Jesus, the very embodiment of God’s grace.

Rev. Fred Demaray asked a mother of four children how she had raised them. He said, “Do you love each one equally? Do you treat each one the same as all the others?” The wise mother replied, “I loved all of them greatly, but I never wanted to love them equally.

I loved the one that was down until he got up.
I loved the one who was weak until she was strong. I loved the one that was hurt until he was healed. I loved the one who was lost until she was found.”

What has been your experience of God’s grace in your life?

A minister shared an experience of transformation whereby he moved from a mind focused on fairness to a mind centred on God’s grace. He said, “My grandfather remarried after my grandmother died. He was married for ten or eleven years to a woman that no one in his family liked very much. The family considered this step-grandmother to be shrill, demanding and not nice to people in the family. They felt that she had taken their grandfather away from them when he was such a cherished person in the family circle. So it hurt a lot.”

The minister’s grandfather died a few years before the step-grandmother. As a result of her unwillingness to relate to the minister’s family, her family received many possessions that belonged to the minister’s grandmother and grandfather.

The minister admitted that it rankled him. It was hard for him to see the grace. But he learned to let go of the resentment and hurt. He came to see that the grace in the situation was that his grandfather was cared for and cooked for and probably lived longer than he would have as a widower.
The truth about God, according to this parable of Jesus, is that God does not act as we expect. God surprises us by not being the God we thought we had. God may not give us “what we deserve”, but something different. God may give us grace. God is extravagant, effusive love. And by God’s grace we receive much more than we deserve.

How should we live in response to that?
When we find ourselves in frustrating situations and are tempted as were the day-long vineyard workers to say, “That’s not fair!” let’s admit that life’s not fair. It’s good.

Life’s about working in God’s vineyard, serving our God who reigns, and recognizing whose vineyard it is.

May your life be blessed with grace heaped upon grace, and may God keep using us to be gracious towards one another.

Amen.