I think I have mentioned before the New Yorker comic which shows two dogs dressed in business suits sitting in a bar. The first dog looks to the second and says, “It’s not enough that dogs win, cats must also lose.” And this is a pretty decent summary of most of the lessons we have in today’s lectionary. In Jonah we hear one of the more comical reasons for someone to be cross with God when the prophet says, “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” In other words, Jonah was mad at God for being kind to the people of Nineveh and not raining down fire and destruction on them. In the parable that Jesus tells we have a landowner who hires people at various points in the day and when they all receive a full days wage those who had worked the longest “grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’” They got a full day’s wage but those who worked only part of the day did not lose the appropriate amount of their wages. And I think if we are honest with ourselves, we, at least on some level, probably sympathize a bit with those who are upset that they worked the whole day and got the same amount as those that barely worked. It does not seem fair. But here is the thing. When we sympathize with those who worked the whole day, we are assuming that we have worked the whole day and have earned a full days wages. What I mean by this is that this is obviously not a story about labor practices of landowners in first century Palestine but is rather meant to be an explanation of God and his mercy. Those that worked the whole day are the equivalent of those who have gone through life without having done anything wrong. The full days wage is the equivalent of salvation. So, if you have gone through life without sinning you, in a sense, have earned your salvation. Now, hopefully this won’t come as a shock to you, but no one, save Jesus, in the history of humanity has done everything right and thereby earned their salvation. If you don’t want to take my word for it you can ask St. Paul who says in Romans, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” See this parable and the story we have from Jonah today are not really meant to be seen from the perspective of us having gotten everything right. We are rather sinners who worship a gracious God.

Sometimes people make assertions about this or that virtue or habit being the most important thing in life – maybe its love, kindness or waiting fifteen minutes after eating to go swimming. And one of the words I hear on occasion as being the root of all that is good and true is gratitude. Now I don’t know if it is the root of everything, but I will say that it is pretty important. And I think in many ways this is central to what Jesus is conveying in the parable today. He is pointing out that we have not earned what it is that God rewards us with. We are not meant to look at this parable and say, “I’m not sure I like it but if God wants to give all those miserable sinners the same reward that I have earned I guess that is his business.” No, we need to remember that we are the ones who have not worked the full day, that we are the ones who are rewarded despite our shortcomings. Now there is something I want to caution about in looking at this story. This is not simple a story about going to heaven but is rather a story about our entire relationship with God. Because we are sinful creatures, we are unable to be in relationship with God by our own power. The full days wage is not just something that comes at the end of our life but is rather something that we can experience today and every day. What this parable is saying is that whether or not we have sins of great magnitude or just some fairly pedestrian ones God will forgive them. And because he forgives them, we can be in relationship with him.

I am sure that I have made this point before but want to revisit it quickly and it has to do with the culturally predominant view of heaven. It is seen as something like a reward, but it is a reward that is detached from our earthly pilgrimage. It is kind of like a really nice cruise or all-inclusive resort where we get to eat really good food and enjoy enriching cultural experiences or at least watch some NASCAR. God is there but he has a more avuncular role, just making sure that everyone is having a good time and refreshing our pinot noir. In this understanding heaven is something of a continuation of our will. And the only thing that might be a bit challenging in this life is that we need to figure out a way to bribe the bouncer to let us through the pearly gates when we die. And in such an understanding it is natural to read into this parable the idea that Jesus already bribed the bouncer or will if we ask him to. We can do what we want on earth, occasionally ask for forgiveness and it’s Club Med for eternity. But the thing is heaven is not unrelated to our time on earth. Our inclination should not be to make sure we get through, but rather should be gratitude to God for allowing us to be in communion with him in the first place. When God forgives our sins, it is not to get us into heaven but is rather so that we can be in communion with him now. So, if we don’t really like spending time with God and functioning in this world as he desires us to function then we probably aren’t really going to enjoy heaven all that much. Our time on this earth and our time after death are to be a continuation of love, affection and gratitude towards God. And so, if you don’t like spending time in the presence of God now, heaven is probably not the place for you. It would be like sending me to a Brad Pitt film festival. I mean if I really don’t like seeing one of his movies why would I want to see a whole bunch of them. If we don’t take advantage of being in communion with God now, why do we think we would enjoy doing that nonstop.

You see in the parable all of the laborers did some sort of work. They all exhibited a willingness to do what the master asked them to do. There hearts and minds were focused on God and his kingdom. And like in Christianity we have individuals who were raised in the church and have never missed a service and we have people who spent most of there life cooking meth in their basement and just converted last week. But in God’s economy they are both treated the same because they both have the desire to be with God more.

God is not fair and for that we should rejoice. Because if he was fair and gave us what we deserved we would not be able to be with him this day and forevermore.