

Anyone who has ever lived in a family with more than one person in it has likely heard the expression “It’s not fair!” All it takes is for someone to get something the others don’t have or to be treated differently than the others feel they deserve and the uproar begins.

Superficially, our sense of fair play and equal treatment seems to be the underlying human reality behind our cries of “It’s not fair!” We may also feel it’s what’s behind the anger expressed by the disappointed workers in today’s gospel. A closer reading of the story in the context of the fundamental message of Scripture might lead us to another conclusion altogether though. Let me tell you a story or two and you can decide for yourself.

When our three children were little, every so often one of them would come to me or my wife and ask which of them was our favorite. Now there are some questions in life which have only one correct answer. For example, when your wife asks you if her new dress makes her look fat, most men have come to realize one way or the other that “No, dear” is the only answer that will do.

Likewise, to our children’s question, there’s only one right answer: “We love you each exactly the same.” As we came to find out, and maybe you have, too, that’s not the question they were really asking nor the answer for which they were looking; it was something else. I was talking about this with my friend Ernie not too long ago. He agreed, and told me that his daughter Alice had come to him just last week and accused him of loving her brother more than her.

“I asked her to tell me more,” Ernie said, “and she told me: ‘You love him more than me because he does the lawn, shovels the snow, washes the car without asking, hangs up all his clothes and does everything well in school.’”

“I told her that was all true, but we loved her just the same as him even though she didn’t do some of those things. She wasn’t buying a syllable of that, and I could see that it was pointless to try to convince her, so I told her ‘Alice – I’m going to tell you a big secret right now that you can never share with anyone, under penalty of death.’”

“Alice loves secrets, especially sharing them with other people, so she listened up closely. Then I leaned toward her and whispered, ‘Alice, you’re actually my favorite – you always have been.’ I could tell that she had instantly stopped thinking about what she was planning to say next because her jaw dropped and she asked me to repeat myself. I did, and reminded her under penalty of death not to tell anyone, especially her brother.”

“So then she went right out and told him?” I asked Ernie.

“Of course,” Ernie said, “and it wasn’t five minutes later that Tommy came in and asked if he could have a word with me.”

“That must have been fun,” I remarked.

“Actually, it was,” Ernie replied.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I told him *he* was actually my favorite,” Ernie said, “– always had been. You should’ve seen the expression on his face. ‘You can’t have *two* favorites, Dad!’ he told me.”

“Are you telling me it’s not fair?” I asked.

“No, it’s not about being fair,” Tommy told me, “it’s about being logical.”

“I told him I agreed, but that he needed to learn a thing or two about the logic of love. Then I asked him to fetch his sister and join my wife and me at the kitchen table. ‘You’re both my favorites,’ I told them. ‘Always have been. You’re my favorite Alice and you’re my favorite Tommy,’” I explained. “‘I can’t love either one of you more than I do, nor can mom. You both always have all our love, equally, no matter what you do or don’t do. The logic of love is that there is no logic. There are no calculations or pay scales, and comparisons have no meaning.’”

“My wife elaborated, saying, ‘It’s like the way it is at church when we go up to receive communion. No one gets *more* Jesus than anyone else. Love doesn’t work that way. Everyone gets the same gift. It’s God’s way of saying that God loves us each of us exactly the same.’”

“‘But doesn’t God love some people more?’” Alice asked. “‘I mean like saints and holy people?’”

“Frances and I shook our heads. ‘No, Alice,’ I explained, ‘no saint would ever ask God to love her or him more than anyone else. If anything, like St. Paul remarked once, they might wish it to be

just the opposite if it would bring people closer to God. You see, saints know that there's a big problem with "more," I told her."

"What's the problem?" Alice asked."

"Remember when we watched that old movie, *Wall Street*, on Netflix last summer?" I asked."

"Not really," Alice and Tommy replied.

"Well, no matter," I said "There was a wonderful line in it when one of the characters asked another, "What's enough for you, anyway?" He answered "More. More is enough for me.""

"That kind of "more,"" I told Alice, "never has enough, even though it has everything it needs."

"Why are some people like that?" Tommy asked me."

"I don't run the universe, Tommy," I told him. "Maybe for some it's greed, fear for others, envy perhaps. Whatever it is, it's not love. Love in a person always seeks what's good for others before it seeks what's good for itself. That's what "enough" means to love. It's always looking out for number one, and number one is always someone else."

"Tommy and Alice looked at each other and then at us," Ernie said. "Then Alice told me quietly, 'You know, Dad, I think the question I was really asking was just whether or not you really loved me, not whether you loved Tommy more. Sometimes I feel afraid I have to earn your love, that somehow I'm not enough, that I should be something more. But I hear you telling me love doesn't work that way.'" My wife and I shook our heads with a smile and gently touched our children's arms. 'No, Alice,' I said, 'it isn't that way with our love for you, and it certainly isn't that way with God's love for any of us.'" Alice and Tommy smiled back, relaxed, and Alice said, "Thanks for setting us straight. Love you guys!"

I suggest to you that's the inner meaning of today's gospel. Generosity is but one dimension of the experience of love. The vineyard owner, who represents God in the story, is not just a nice guy, but one who loves without distinction and that, friends, is as fair as it gets.