

They say that coming to faith is like peeling an infinite onion. There's always a new and deeper layer to uncover, and just when you think you've got something figured out, there's another deeper meaning to discover. So today, as our country – and world – economy seem to be in grave trouble, I am comforted by our readings today in their suggestion that there is a deeper economy than the one we see all around us in our day-to-day lives. I'm talking about God's economy. "God's Economy" is a theological term that refers to God's interactions with creation – God's way of loss and gain– God's way of give and take with us.

In God's economy, much of what we think of as fair is turned on its head. For heaven's sake, why would God spare a town as reviled as ancient Nineveh? Nineveh, the literally awesome capitol city of ancient Assyria, the seat of unmatched power and corruption – the city the prophet Jonah would rather have died than see it rewarded. And why, in Jesus' parable, would someone who just started working the field a half an hour ago receive the same wage as the early bird who'd been working hard since sunrise? Just what kind of crazy economy is this?

Our sensibilities lead us to name unfairness quickly and from the gut – because we've all experienced the unfairness of the world. Maybe at some time in your life, you've known what it feels like to bust your chops for a day's wage while others seem to get a free ride. Or maybe someone less qualified than you was given a promotion over you. Or maybe your many years in a company didn't seem to count for much at layoff time. Chances are you can really relate to the resentment the all day workers felt in Jesus' story.

You might also know what it's like to be like the latecomers to the field, just barely showing up and getting far more in return than you could ever imagine you deserved – maybe once you were laid up and people cared for you, fed you, assisted you when you could do nothing for yourself; or maybe once a complete stranger went out of his or her way to help you when you lost your wallet or something like that – a situation in which people who owed you nothing freely gave to you with no expectation of anything in return. If so, you can probably relate to both the feeling of shock and disbelief the late workers must have felt at such generosity, as well as the feeling of being lucky beyond belief.

Or maybe, you've had the occasion to feel like those workers still in the square late in the afternoon. When the landowner asked them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" they replied "Because no one has hired us." I don't know if any of you were as un-athletic as I was in school. But I can remember as clearly as if it were yesterday that feeling I had when teams were being picked. No one ever picked me. I'd still be on that bench today if the gym teacher hadn't made someone pick me. "No one has hired us." The story doesn't tell us why they hadn't been hired. Although we could be quick to project judgment on them as slackers, maybe they weren't lazy at all. It could be that they were disabled or spoke a foreign language or were over 50. Or maybe they were single mothers who didn't get there until late due to child care issues that morning. Maybe they were just overqualified to work in a vineyard. Maybe there was nothing wrong with them at all but there just weren't enough jobs to go around. Such things and many more spell big trouble in our current world economy.

But in God's economy, all are welcome in the vineyard, regardless of when they arrive. No matter what the reason for being late, they are still received with open arms. You don't need to stand here idle. You can come on into the vineyard.

During hard times like we're having this week, it's a good time to peel off a few layers of the usual and familiar onion to find a fresh perspective. And today we're again reminded that there is a deeper economy, in which competition is turned upside down. Not only are those who are last welcomed in, they receive their reward first.

There is a deeper economy, in which those filled by resentment that everything seems so unfair are embraced, accepted and loved anyway.

There is a deeper economy, where the metaphor for life is not the survival of the fittest in a harsh and inhospitable environment, but a lavish and generous banquet table open to anyone who accepts the invitation to pull up a chair.

There is a deeper economy, in which the ones no one wants – the poor, the sick, the prisoner, the outcast – as well as those parts within us we believe no one would ever love – are not only welcomed and embraced, but honored most highly of all.

If even those power hungry Ninevites could be transformed by God, certainly, there's hope for us all in 21st century America. Because there is a deeper economy. And it is alive and trading right here, right now among us all. We are its currency – its energy. The way we choose to treat each other make it alive and real among us.

Hard times and changes of every kind come to everyone, and suffering is a part of human life. But no matter what you're going through, no matter how frightening life gets, no matter how unfair this life can be, we are never, ever alone through any of it. There is a deeper economy. And in the Kingdom of God, each and every one is always welcome in the vineyard – to work for what is more valuable than gold and seek a reward that is greater than this world can ever bestow. In these uncertain times, we can be assured that not only are we citizens of this country and this time in history, but we are also living members of God's own body. At this church, we are being called to create a place on this earth where all are welcomed, all are celebrated, all are honored, all are included – a place where God's economy is not just thought about and admired, but made real.

Let us pray:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*