

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A-2017)

When you first hear today's holy Gospel, it doesn't sound just right. It seems like Jesus is telling us that life is not fair and that's OK with Him. In His parable, you have the owner of a vineyard who seems to be treating his workers unjustly. In fact, I think most people who hear this parable have the same reaction as those guys who were hired at dawn and worked all day. We think, why didn't they get paid more than those who only worked an hour? It doesn't seem fair that the ones who only worked an hour got the same pay as those who worked all day. However, as with all of our Lord's parables, there is more to the story.

Before I say more, let me give you a little background. Early in the morning, the owner of the vineyard went looking for laborers to bring in the grape harvest. Because grapes all ripen about the same time, when the harvest was ready, the vineyard owner would need all the help he could get.

So, he went to the marketplace in search of labor. Now the marketplace was a kind of labor exchange, and the men who went there were not lazy. They would come with their tools ready to work. In fact, they were eager for work. These men were poor people, and they had families to feed. Even if they received the usual daily wage (which was a denarius, a small silver coin), they would still have had barely enough to buy food for the family.

Now when the owner hired the first group, all of them agreed to work for the usual daily wage. So off they went to work, and they worked hard all day, and don't forget, the sun in Palestine, is very hot and the air is very dry. Consequently, working in midday is very uncomfortable.

Then throughout the day, the owner went back to the marketplace and each time he found more workers whom he hired. So, while those guys who were hired at dawn were working, other men kept showing up. Some came at 9, some at noon, some at 3 and some even came at 5. Then, at sundown, the owner came along and had his foreman pay everyone, beginning with those who only worked an hour and ending with those who had started work at 6 a.m.

So, here's the apparently unfair thing. At the end of the day, everyone got the same pay: the usual daily wage. When this happened, the men who had worked all day complained. They figured that if those who only worked an hour got a full day's pay, then they should get more, but the owner rightly pointed out that they had agreed to work for a day's pay and that's exactly what he gave them. Therefore, there was no injustice.

Now, before we try and figure out the point of this parable, I want you to listen again to what our Lord said through the Prophet Isaiah in our first reading. Here it is:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways ... As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts."

With those words in mind, let's consider what does this parable might mean. First of all, the owner of the vineyard is of course God. The workers are us. The day represents our life, the time that we have here on Earth, and the wages are God's gifts to us.

That said, it's clear that God has given us all different gifts. Some of us are strong and healthy. Others are not. Some of us are very intelligent others are not. Some of us are wealthy. Others are not. Some of us are very artistic. Others are not. Some of us have been blessed with many children. Others have not and so on.

So why does God treat us differently? Why doesn't He give us all the same chance? Why have some received more and others less? What is God not fair? Why doesn't He treat us all the same?

Actually, these are the wrong questions. We need to remember who we are. We are God's creatures, and He owes us nothing. Indeed, all we have He has given us. We don't deserve anything from God either. What we have is not our right. It is not ours to demand. It is God's pure gift to us. Therefore, we should be thankful that we have received anything at all.

Think about it this way. Suppose a child said to his mother or father, I demand a new bicycle for my birthday. It's my right and you have to give it to me. Or better, what if your dog said to you, "Starting tonight, I want steak for dinner; it's my right and by the way, make it medium rare."

More than a few people think that God owes them something. Money, fame, happiness, a better life, possessions, health, but God doesn't owe anything to any of us. He is not in our debt.

That's why when the workers hired at dawn demanded more money, the owner said, "Take your pay and go home. I intend to give this man who was hired last the same pay as you. I am free to do as I please with my money, am I not?"

Whatever God gives us is more than we had. If someone has received more than you have, you have no right to complain or be envious. God can give what He wants.

That said, here is another point to consider. We haven't all entered into God's family at the same time. Some have been newly baptized. Others have just been received into the Church. Still others may have been Catholic for some time.

Sometimes those who have been around a long time get the idea that they should have more say on how things are done. That they are somehow more important or special. We might say that everyone is equal, but some people think they are more equal than others. Not so.

In God's eyes, we are all precious. At the same time, we all have different parts to play in building up the kingdom, and whether these are great or small, our contributions will be measured not by their size but by the love with which they were done. This is symbolized by the different times the laborers came to work.

There is one more thing about this parable which tells us more about God than it does about us. Remember that these laborers were poor people with families to feed. They had no reserves. What they earned for the day was what they used to buy food for the day. So, if they had no work, they did not eat, and more to the point, neither did their children.

Obviously, the owner of the vineyard knew this. So, when he gave a full day's wage to everyone, even to those who had only worked for an hour, he knew that he was really feeding their families more than paying their wages. In that sense, he was being truly generous.

In the same way, God is generous with us. Even when the work that we do for Him is more than anyone else, it is still a small thing to God. Much more important to Him is the love with which we do our work. God will measure our contributions using that standard, and He will reward us accordingly.

We must not forget that while God owes us nothing, He is still very generous. We are His own dear children whom He loves. He is our loving Father who desires our happiness, and so, even though He is under no obligation, God gives us not only what we need, but much more. In fact, He has given and will continue to give us more than we can ever imagine or deserve.

So, let us be thankful for the gifts we have received, and also, as we look at other people's lives and what they have, let us never be envious because God is generous. Remember that while someone else may have more than you, it only means that they have greater responsibilities to use what they have well.

God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. What you may have planned for yourself or for someone else is not at all what God has planned. He gives us gifts and talents according to His plans and not ours.

Our part is simply to make sure that we use what we have received wisely and lovingly. If we do so, then even if we are last in what we have received, we will be first in the kingdom of heaven. Amen.