

## **Twenty-fifth Sunday of the Year**

### **THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD: Matthew 20:1-16**

The case went to court because someone believed he was being treated unfairly. The court, he believed, would be persuaded to his point of view and he would be proven right. He would get justice after all. He told his neighbors he was sure the court would be bound to see it his way. He knew it; and as if to drive the point home, he would clench his fist and pound the table whenever he said it. He knew the truth and being vindicated before the world was just a matter of time. Sometimes, however, a friend or neighbor would hint at the other possibility: that he would lose his case. Like a tiger poised to attack its prey, he would shoot back, "Then I'll appeal it to a higher court, and if I must, I'll appeal it beyond that!" With those words, he would reduce his friends and neighbors to silence.

There is something of that man in every one of us. There is the idea among us that, when life seems decided against us, we can keep going on to a yet higher court until finally we get our own way. Or at least we would surely like that; and perhaps we toy with the idea we would do it, too, if it didn't require so much time and money. Sometimes we even find ourselves complaining to God, ready to take what God does to a higher court because we are unhappy about it. And that's where we link up with today's gospel.

Some people think that this story of Jesus in the gospel of today, Mt. 20:1-16, is unfair and unjust! This is a very serious accusation. Injustice is an ugly thing. All of us have some experience of it. Injustice leaves a wound that takes a long time to heal. Jesus' story is not about injustice, because no injustice is done in it.

Nor is his story about justice, though it goes out of its way to state that justice is done. Justice is a great thing. It is one of the things that is stressed again and again in the Bible. But Jesus' story is not about justice.

**What then is Jesus' story about? It is about generosity. Are you envious because I am generous? That is the key phrase in the story.** The story is about generosity, but not ordinary generosity. It's about a generosity unlike anything we've ever known.

The eleventh-hour workers were not idlers who didn't want to work. They were people no respectable employer would hire. They were the left-overs, the rejects. The idea that any employer would take these people on at the eleventh hour, and pay them a full day's wage, was unthinkable. Yet this is exactly what the owner of the vineyard did. This is the strong point of the parable.

Jesus wasn't talking about human generosity but about the generosity of God. He was illustrating what the First Reading said, 'God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts'. God's generosity utterly transcends human generosity.

The parable was aimed at the Pharisees. They were critical of Jesus because he befriended sinners. Jesus gave them his answer in this parable. In it he showed them what God is like: God is generous and full of compassion for the poor and the outcast.

The grapes were urgently in need of picking, so the vineyard owner hired workers throughout the day in order to complete the harvest without the crop spoiling. The first workers agreed to a daily wage, but the ones hired later were promised only that they would be given "whatever is right."

At the day's end, all were paid. That's when the fuss began, because all of those later workers were paid exactly the same amount as the others. Whether they worked all day or a few hours made no difference. The wage was the same. The full-day workers thought they had more coming when compared with the latecomers, and they were ready to take it to a higher court. They would demand justice!

This parable, however, is about the kingdom of heaven, and this time there is no appeal. **This parable is about how God chooses to give what is God's.** Whatever is given, be it the smallest of amounts, is God's generosity and we have no claim on God. What Martin Luther wrote two days before his death is true for our whole life before God, "We are beggars, that is true." And for one beggar to complain that another has received a larger slice of bread is shameful. *What then do we as the Church of Jesus Christ need to hear in this parable?* I will give three responses to that question.

First, we need to hear that **God is continually calling workers.** In our parable the owner keeps employing people throughout the day. It's a matter of urgency. The grapes need harvesting right now, not tomorrow. Everyone who

hears gets a chance to work. If the owner had stopped hiring with the early morning crew, the fruit would have rotted. So he persisted in adding to the work force.

Even today God continues to work in the same amazing way. There are people who have heard God's call very early in life and spend all their years in faithful service. They are valuable and needed. But there are also people who, for one reason or another, hear and respond to God's call late in their years, even shortly before they die. The world needs their work and witness no less than that of the people who are "always there when they're needed."

Does God say one is important and not the other? In no way.

Where does this idea come from, that some people are important to God and others are not? Or that some folks are treasured members of the church without which it would not survive and others don't matter? This is where it comes from: human pride and sinfulness. Surely not from God! For God keeps calling; the vineyard owner keeps signing up workers all day long.

Second, we need to hear from this parable that God's call itself is grace and goodness. The workers in the parable who were convinced they were treated unfairly because they simply receive what they were promised instead of an additional bonus, those workers had received more than they had realized. Yes, they would receive their day's wages, and already that would have been enough. Yet they also had received purpose in their lives, meaning for their day, opportunity to be of service. I think they had forgotten that - or had not eyes to see it.

It is sometimes difficult for long-time church members to accept and rejoice in the presence of late-corners to the faith who are full of life and spirit. Sometimes there is jealousy, because in the fire of their newfound love for Christ, these late-corners begin making things happen. The church breathes new enthusiasm because of them. Fresh breezes blow. New ideas blossom. Positive energies flow. All great things - except for those people who thought the church belonged to them and who do not like to see others taking hold. And this does happen.

It happens when people who have been part of the faith all their years forget that they have already been enjoying a life full of blessings. They have been strengthened by classes at church, forgiven and uplifted in communion, comforted in their sorrows, felt "goose bumps" of joyful excitement at Easter. If it is now someone else's turn to know the benefits of Christ - benefits which include the joy and meaning found in serving - then there is no appeal to a higher court. This is the way God has designed it: that all might know "the riches of his grace, which he has lavished upon us." (Ephesians 1:7-8)

This is the third lesson then: that God gives grace as God desires and we have no reason to complain. God is a God who gives and gives and gives and controls that generosity without us having any justifiable claim to interfere. God gives the benefits of full life to all, not a select few, but to all. **God gives to everyone the call to serve and work in the largeness of his vineyard.**

**There is no seniority in the kingdom of God - neither a seniority of years, nor of service, nor of offices held, nor of wisdom. There are only servants willing to taste God's tomorrow by working alongside other servants today in humbleness under one Lord.**

The question of you and me is not who came early to serve; The question is; Are we answering the call God has given us without belittling the call God has given others? What the church long ago struggled to learn and still struggles to grasp, is that God's grace is sufficient for all of us.

God's grace is always available to us all. God gives grace to others, too, because God is God and generously so. There is no higher court to which we can appeal when his generosity surpasses our understanding. God is God. That is good enough, because God is good.

Amen