

Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Year A

Isa 55: 6-9

Ps 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18

Phil 1: 20-24, 27

Mt 20: 1-16

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Scholars tell us that the parables of Jesus were intended to shock his audience, to get under their skin, to wake them up and get them thinking about the kingdom of God. A Samaritan taking time and money to care for a complete stranger and a Jew is an amazing image of compassion; a father running out to welcome back the spendthrift black sheep is an overwhelming depiction of forgiveness; a rich man who feasts sumptuously while a poor, sick man dies of hunger at his doorstep is a terrible warning that the kingdom of God demands a change of heart, a new vision, a sharing of gifts with those in need.

The problem, though, is that none of these are terribly shocking. For me, at least, these don't get under my skin, they don't change the way I think, they don't lead me to a new vision. Because I accept the fact that I should be doing all these things: caring for the stranger, forgiving those who injure me, sharing with the poor. I accept them as the right things to do, the Christian way to live, even though I don't do them nearly as often as I should, nor with the genuine devotion and love that the Lord commands. These parables set up a goal I miss far too often - but the goal itself is not shocking or surprising. Perhaps for all of us, who have heard these stories again and again, the main response is not shock but sorrow. We know what is expected of us, we know what is right in the eyes of God, but we follow our own selfish hearts. But though we may greet the command to love our enemy and treat the poor as our own family with less than Christian enthusiasm, none of us say, "Wait a minute, what's he talking about? That's wrong. We shouldn't do that. That way of life makes no sense."

Today's gospel is the exception. For me, and perhaps for many of you, this story is shocking, it does get under my skin, I am bothered by it because it just doesn't make sense. The story is terribly unjust. Men who spend a long day in backbreaking labor under a hot Middle Eastern sun are given the same pay as those who worked only an hour, at the end of the day when the land was cooling off. Even though the workers who worked all day had themselves agreed to their pay, it is hard not to sympathize when they complain to the vineyard owners. We can put ourselves in their place so easily. Why should those who do not do equal work receive equal pay? It's just not fair! Further, it's just bad business. This vineyard will go under in a year if the foreman doesn't do a better job. Not only does he alienate the workers who have put in a hard day's work for him, not only does he squander money on latecomers, but he virtually guarantees that a lot of the men who worked so hard and so long today will show up late tomorrow, in hopes of getting the same pay for a whole lot less work.

Where is the logic in all of this? It's one thing to forgive an errant son, or share your food with the poor. It is an entirely different matter to give twelve hours worth of wages to someone who worked four hours, or two hours, or one hour. That's bad business, that's bad management, that's just unfair.

But as God says through the prophet Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.” God thinks differently than we do, He sees differently, He acts differently. And Jesus tells this parable, this aggravating, illogical story, to prod us into seeing and thinking and acting a little bit more like God. That’s Jesus goal in this parable: Get us angry, get us thinking, get us grateful, get us to imitate God Himself.

The key, I think, is this: We who hear this parable, every one of us here today, are the one-hour wonders, the late come workers. Not one of us showed up at dawn. Not one of us showed up at nine. Not one of us showed up at noon. Not one of us showed up at three. We all came at five. We all showed up at the last hour. Yes, perhaps we have been Christians all our lives, raised in the Church, educated in Catholic schools or CCD, received all our sacraments, supported the parish with our time and talent and treasure. All of this is good, and the Lord rejoices at our devotion. But it doesn’t change the fact that we all showed up for work at 5:00 p.m.

Consider this: At the start of every Mass, we ask for forgiveness “for what I have done, and for what I have failed to do.” Raised in the Church, still we squander our chances to serve the poor and forgive the sinner. Consider this: Every year we celebrate Lent, ask pardon for our sins, renew our efforts to follow Christ. Baptized as infants, still we stray, we fall, the months slip past without opening a Bible or saying the rosary or getting to confession. Consider this: Each time the Lord’s Prayer passes our lips, we seek the forgiveness of God for our trespasses against His good will and our neighbor’s need. Confirmed in the Spirit, fed by the Eucharist, consecrated in Christian marriage, still we hold back, still we do not offer the Lord our whole lives. Whenever we began to follow Christ, whether as infants, children, or adults, we have held back. And still we hold back. We don’t show up at dawn ready to throw our whole lives into the task of following Christ. Rather, we say, “Lord, I’ll give you everything, everything but *this* desire, everything but *this* one fault, all I have except this one deceit, this single sin, this precious pleasure.” As many years as we have lived, as many miles as we have followed Christ, we have still yet to start, still yet to live and work and love as Christ commands. Every Mass we have celebrated has been the 5:00 p.m. Mass - and few of us have always been on time, even at that late hour!

Saint Augustine prayed, “Late have I loved you, Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!” So is it with all of us. When each of us stands before God, we will receive a whole day’s wage for a bad hour’s work, an outpouring of grace in exchange for our sins, a share in the life of God Himself in return for our few feeble efforts in the vineyard of the Lord. If today’s gospel seems unfair to you as it does to me, then we must pray for each other, that the Lord will grant us His crowning grace: the gift of seeing how much He has given us, and how little we have worked for it. Knowing that, feeling in our bones and in our hearts that God gives what we do not deserve and what he does not owe us, may we begin to work, even at this late hour. We can start this very day: by showing forgiveness to someone who does not deserve it, by sharing our food with someone who has not worked for it, by giving to someone who may not say thanks. For so it is that our Father deals with all of us.