

Homily for Sunday, Sept. 20, 2020 – 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

There are two things to keep in mind when we try to grapple with this parable (Mt. 20:1-16). Firstly, Matthew is writing for his faith community that is a mixture of Jewish Christians and Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians. The Jewish Christians know that their faith has come down to them through the centuries beginning with Abraham, Moses, and all the great prophets. It is a long-standing and rich relationship with God who selected them as the Chosen People. The Gentile Christians, by contrast, are seen as late-comers to the faith and know nothing about all this history. So, they are despised much like the late-comers in today's parable who only work an hour.

The second thing that is important in setting the context for this gospel story is what happened just prior to Jesus telling this parable. What happened was that a young, rich man full of himself because he has obeyed all the commandments, rejects Jesus' invitation to leave his possessions behind to follow the Lord (Mt. 19: 16-22). Peter overhears the conversation and asks, "That guy walked away from your invitation and got to keep all his possessions. We did not walk away from you, but gave up all our possessions to follow you, so what's in it for us?" Jesus assures Peter every sacrifice will be restored 100-fold and eternal life will flow through you. In other words, "You're going to get everything, Peter, and then some." For as Jesus says a few chapters earlier that if you seek the Kingdom of God first, then you do not have to ask for what you need. Your Father in heaven already knows and gives what is needed automatically. With these two contexts, "late-comers to Christianity" and "don't fret because God provides," let's get into the parable.



What is a disciple? A disciple is someone who does God's work. In this parable, working to build God's kingdom here on earth is compared to labourers working in a landowner's vineyard. A day labourer belongs to a very vulnerable group. Day labourers do not have permanent standing with a single employer. They

depend on a call every day. (Much like supply teachers without permanent status who wait for a call each morning, ready, willing and able to work, but never sure if or when they will be needed).

The usual daily wage is what you need to sustain life today. Think of it as daily bread, the kind Jesus taught us to pray for and to hunger for when he taught us the Our Father. ***“Give us this day, our daily bread.”*** God does not give more, and God does not give less. God gives us everything we need for today. Everything. Nothing God gives us can be saved or hoarded, which saves us from the delusion of self-sufficiency.

The early morning worker are promised the usual daily wage, that is, whatever they need to sustain them this day. The second wave of workers (9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m.) are promised to be paid ***“whatever is right,”*** a just wage. The drive for the landowner in hiring this second group of labourers is that there is work to be done, and these people are idle. It bothers the owner that people are idle when such important work needs to be done. The third wave of labourers are also idle, not because they are lazy but because as the parable tells us, ***“no one has hired us.”*** The landowner immediately hires this third group without any promise of a daily wage nor any promise of paying them “whatever is right.” He enters into a unique agreement with each group.

When it comes time to paying the workers the landowner gives everyone, regardless of when they started work, the usual daily wage. Everyone gets everything they need to sustain them today. Almost immediately, there is a perceived inequality and the grumbling starts. What the landowner has done is make all people who work in the vineyard equal, regardless of how long they have worked. The landowner gives to all the same. Then comes the last line of the parable, the kicker: ***So, the last will be first, and the first will be last.*** This is not a reversal of the order of the categories of first and last; this is the destruction of all categories of first and last. In God’s kingdom, everyone is equally important. There are no firsts and there are no lasts.

The bestowal of daily bread, that is, whatever you need to sustain you this day, is not correlated to the amount of work you do. When the grumbling starts the landowner says, ***“Are you envious because I am generous?”*** In a moment of honesty, we would have to say, “That’s exactly it!” We want God to be generous

with us as long as God is not generous to those undeserving, lazy people over there. The recording that plays over and over in our heads goes something like this, "If someone gets what I am getting but hasn't put in as much work as I have, I am being cheated." Most of us have this recording running continuously which makes us grumble-ready. Notice how everyone was completely happy with the agreement they had with the landowner and with their pay until someone entered into the world of comparison. The moment they compared themselves with another, the grumbling started. Notice also, everyone, regardless of how long they worked, gets the maximum pay. Why is it that, even though we receive the maximum, we still feel we are owed more? Is a small pail, full to the top with water, jealous of a large barrel also full to the top?

So, Peter, to answer your question about what you will get for following me, when the rich, young man got to keep his possessions and did not follow me is this: you will get everything! Although you will get everything, you will enjoy none of it. Why? Because you will see someone else whom you deem unworthy as also receiving everything, and envy will fill you. The envy will immediately displace the joy, and so you will not enjoy the "everything" you have already received. You will be in heaven, Peter, but it will feel like hell because someone less "worthy" in your estimation will be getting the same, generous, undeserved reward you are getting. And the grumbling will begin again. That is how heaven become hell even here on earth.

As we continue on with The Season of Creation, where Pope Francis encourages us to renew our relationship with God, with the Earth, and with the poor, the theme this week is: ***There is enough for our need, not our greed.*** How fitting that is in light of the gospel, where we can receive all we needed today from God's abundance and still feel we are owed more. Does a lack of gratitude for all that I have lead to a false idea of entitlement? What daily bread am I grateful for?

Fr. Phil