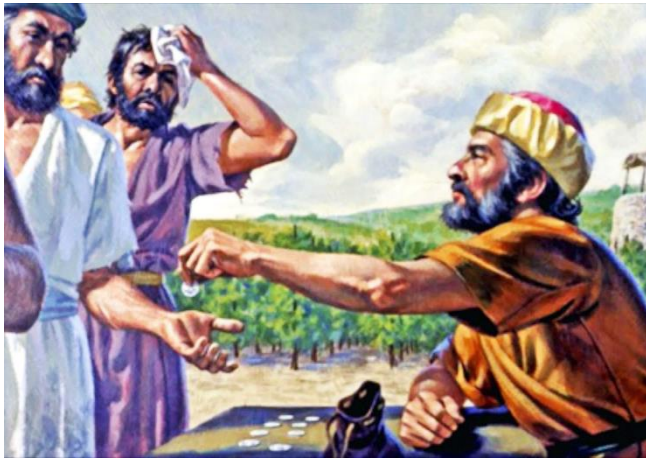


Homily - September 23rd and 24th, 2023
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time



That gospel passage always rubs me the wrong way. Even as I try to be open-minded about the conclusion, there's still a part of me that wants to join the voices of the laborers, who worked all day under the scorching sun, and say, "Unfair!" Isaiah, in that first reading, kind of pre-warned us that something was coming down the pike that would rub us the wrong way when he said, "***My thoughts are not***

God's thoughts, nor are my ways God's ways." That's the Biblical understatement of the year! Nothing could be truer.

Having said that, let's look at what this parable might be saying to us here and now. And let's do it using a bit of context, because to try and understand anything outside of its context is near impossible.

Context number one: this parable is about God's generosity. It ends with the landowner's question, "***Are you envious because I am generous?***" For a moment, think back to last Sunday's gospel. It was about a king who forgave a slave a \$600,000 debt without a moment's hesitation. That slave benefitted immensely from the king's generosity, obviously. And as you remember, in the very process of leaving the king's palace, that same slave bumped into another slave who owed him a mere \$1. He seized that slave by the throat and had him thrown into prison until he would pay the \$1. The king symbolizes God and God's generosity. The first slave mimics, very closely, every one of us. We quickly forget God's *daily* generosity toward us, fire off a prayer of gratitude on the second Monday of October, and as soon as Thanksgiving is over, we have our hands around someone neck demanding our dollar back.

Here is a hint. When you read the parables of Jesus, your automatic tendency is to relate to one or another of the characters and inwardly say, "That's me." The key, however, is to move beyond that and ask yourself, "Who represents God in this

parable? And how am I being called to imitate God to the people in my life?" God is the generous king, from last Sunday's gospel, who forgives us 600, 000 times while we debate whether someone is worthy of one act of forgiveness from us. Yes, Isaiah, our ways are not God's ways.

Context number two. This parable is about heaven, paradise, eternal life. In today's parable, every worker, whether they worked all day long or just the last hour is granted a usual daily wage. Think of a "usual daily wage" as the reward of heaven itself. A little more context. What happened just prior to Jesus telling the parable about the workers in the vineyard, is that the disciples tried to scold children for getting too close to Jesus. Jesus responded by saying, "Don't stop them, for the kingdom of *heaven* belongs to them." The first reference to heaven.

Right after that, a young, rich, self-righteous man asks Jesus what he must do to earn eternal life, *heaven*. The second reference to heaven. Jesus says to him, "First go and sell all his possessions, then come back, and we'll talk." That is the end of him; we never see the man again. Peter overhears the conversation Jesus had with the young, rich man and says, "That guy *did not* follow you and got to keep all his possessions. We *did* follow you, so what are we going to get out of this deal?" Jesus replies to Peter with, "If you are in the counting game, Peter, at the end of time you will get 100 times of everything you ever gave up. But that is not the half of it. You, Peter, will inherit eternal life. Heaven will be yours. But here is the problem, Peter. While you will be rewarded with heaven, you will not enjoy a moment of it. Why? Because in heaven, you will find someone else there, whom you deem did not work as hard as you did, someone who held onto their possessions a lot longer than you did, someone who worked only one hour in the vineyard, and this will tick you off royally. In that moment...poof...heaven will have turned into hell for you, Peter. So, you are going to get it all, Peter, but you are not going to enjoy a moment of it.

Heaven is a reward, but it is not a reward that somehow can be earned or calculated ahead of time. The usual daily wage Jesus is talking about is "heaven." The whole story is about God giving "heaven" to anyone He pleases. When the laborers who worked all day get angry, it is because the work they have done does not matter. This important lesson goes something like this: If the work we do to get into heaven does not matter, it must be because you *cannot earn heaven by*

your work! Every one of us is promised heaven, not because we are good but because God is good.

Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say, "**May your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.**" In other words, when we pray those words, we are committing ourselves to bringing heaven and the generosity of God to earth. We cannot be ambassadors of heaven and give it only to some people and not others. None of us is deserving of heaven. We all live by the grace of God.

If this parable is a shocker and a bit of a stretch, I would like you to think about how all of this comes alive in Jesus' own actions and not just in his words. Jesus' last words on the Cross should disturb us even more than this parable. With his dying breath, he asks his Father in heaven to forgive those who are taking his life for "**they do not know what they are doing.**" They do not deserve forgiveness and they have certainly done nothing to earn it. They will receive it not because they are good but because God is good. And to make things worse, Jesus says to one of the thieves next to him, "**Today, you will be in Paradise with me.**" Jesus promises a usual daily wage, heaven, to a thief dying next to him. How unfair this seems to the rest of us who have been trying so hard for so long to be so good. This thief spent his entire life stealing from others and now he's stolen heaven right under the nose of Jesus. This guy is good at what he does; no wonder he is called the "good thief." This "good thief" is the Church's first Saint and the only one declared so by Jesus himself.

So, why would we begrudge anyone the generosity of God when we ourselves have been the beneficiaries of God's generosity every moment of every day ourselves? We are the latecomers to the vineyard. But more importantly, we are called to grow into the identity of the owner...God.

Fr. Phil