

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
Sept. 20, 2020 - Streaming Mass
25th Sunday of Year A Mt 20:1-16

Of all the parables of Jesus, this is the one that is a real "head-scratcher." It just doesn't seem fair; it offends our basic sense of justice. But, as we heard in today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor or your ways My ways, says the Lord." This parable is upsetting because it invites us to go to those places in our lives that we don't like to visit. It challenges us to confront how we make our judgments about what truly matters in life, how we set our priorities, how we evaluate people, even how we evaluate ourselves, though we may be scarcely aware of what we are doing. A Chinese proverb says, "If you want to know what water is, don't ask a fish." Today's parable invites us to look around at the social environment in which we have been swimming. It invites us to examine what is actually going on there, and then to reconsider the situation from God's point of view.

In the parable, when it comes time to be paid, the laborers hired first grumble because they say they've worked the longest, the hardest, and did not get what they think they deserve, what they feel they are entitled to. Let's put ourselves into the parable and see how close do we come to sounding like those laborers who worked all day long, bearing the heat of the noonday sun. Do we ever hear ourselves saying, "I've worked hard for everything I have; I deserve it; I studied hard in school; I worked my way up; I put up with a lot of stress; I have to deal with a boss who doesn't know how to do his own job; I have to put in long hours, travel a lot more than I want to. I've earned it." And that's true...up to a point.

What about the "water" that we little fish have been swimming in? The world, the market economy we inhabit, is best described as a meritocracy—a social system in which people's status in life depends primarily on their talents, abilities and effort. Those who develop those skills that are valued in the market will have better outcomes. It is the foundation of the "American dream," that if you apply yourself, if you work hard, eventually you will move up in society. That may have been true for those of my generation and older, but it's not true anymore. Today it is harder to rise in the United States and the UK than in many other places in the world, than many places in Europe and in Canada. Society is deeply unfair, if "merit" is viewed largely as the result of the lottery of birth, race, gender, educational opportunities, family connections, etc. Some will insist that their success is all due to their brilliance and tenacity; "born on third base, they go through life, thinking they hit a triple," in the words of Barry Switzer, the former head coach of the Dallas Cowboys. Those who land

on top may come to believe that their success is all their own doing, and that therefore they deserve the bounty the market bestows on them, and by implication that those on the bottom deserve their fate as well. The moral question is whether I recognize how the world has been “rigged” in my favor to the disadvantage of others, and do I believe that, as a Christian, I have any responsibility to those who have been cut out?

Education has become the means by which upper middle-class wealth and status have been passed down through generations. It is where one obtains the credentials to compete in a global economy, to get a degree from a brand-name university, with the expectation that the new economy will provide its rewards in the form of wealth, recognition, honor and esteem. The problem is the children of wealthy parents will win the “merit” race, not necessarily because they are more hard-working, but because their parents were able to invest more in their education, all the way from pre-K on up. How fair is the college admission process when “legacy preferences” are awarded to the well-connected whose families have given hefty contributions over the years? And, how much different is that from the recent scandal of parents bribing the coaches of college athletic teams to get their kids with phony resumes into prestigious schools? It seems that the staff had just learned to follow the lead of the admissions office.

Then, there is the matter of “internships” which rank as the most important factor in deciding to hire a recent college graduate. Understandably employers will prefer someone who has knowledge of the field, but it is unfair if those internships are more easily secured for students from wealthier backgrounds. Basically unregulated, internships are allocated through social networks as social favors. Charles Murray, the conservative sociologist calls them, “affirmative action for the advantaged.” What college student can afford to spend the summer without making any money? Students whose parents are subsidizing them. Those who have access to these internships have an edge in employment over those who have not. Again, an element of privilege is preserved for those who have the right connections.

Does the wealth and status I have achieved really make me so special? During the recent lockdown we saw the contribution of those we came to recognize as “essential” workers. They did not have the opportunity to work at home, but served on the front lines, endangering their lives, driving the buses and subways, checking out customers in grocery stores, making food deliveries, cleaning the floors and hallways in hospitals, and so on. These are people who work hard and are not paid very much, who are largely invisible, whom we often take for granted. During the pandemic we came to recognize our mutual interdependence in ways we usually overlook. Might that help us recognize the valuable contribution made to society by these people we depend on in so many ways—in the work they do, in their service to the community, in

the families they raise? Might that lead us to an appreciation of the “dignity of work,” that one’s worth as a human being is not measured by the size of one’s paycheck?

Today’s parable invites us to see from the perspective of the landowner. That may be difficult because our egocentric point of view is so entrenched. We are more accustomed to see life from the perspective of the laborers, always insisting that we are get what we think we are entitled to. The parable unmasks attitudes of privilege, of entitlement, and challenges us to regard all people equally. The landowner pays each the same wage because each one is valuable in his eyes. So, we are invited to see, as the landowner, as God, sees—that every person is of equal value, and every person should have access to the opportunities to flourish as human beings: adequate health care, decent housing, a quality education, a nutritious diet. Those opportunities should not be hoarded by those who over time have accumulated those advantages for themselves. When, as a nation, will we do something to make the situation more fair? Going to our apartment windows at 7:00 p.m. during the lockdown and applauding the contribution of the “essential” workers and leaving it at that is not much different than sending “thoughts and prayers” for the victims of mass shootings and doing nothing about gun control.

All the parables of Jesus end with the implicit question, “What will I do now; with whom do I identify—with the landowner or with the complaining laborers? “By which set of values am I going to operate: the values of status, of achievement, of success, of preserving my privileges at the cost of depriving others, or working for a society that is more “fair,” where opportunities are more evenly distributed, where many other have a shot at the “brass ring,” where each person is valued as a child of God. This parable, which at first hearing seems to be so unfair, so unsettling, is indeed “good news,” “Gospel,” because it frees us from always having to perform, enslaved to a false set of values, in which like little fish, we swim. We may not be able to get out of the water--in fact, we live at the very epicenter of the realm of meritocracy--but at least we can be aware, when tempted to buy into that system, to affirm instead the vision given to us by Jesus Christ and to work for the realization of that vision.