



September 24, 2023

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time

"...What if I wish to give the last one the same as you?"

Matthew 20:14



Dear Friends;

Last August, I was in southern California for my sister Elaine's wedding. The day before the wedding a group of us were going to have lunch at the El Torrito in Fishermen's Village in Marina Del Rey. Some of us were there early so we walked around the mall for a while. There was a very cool store that had imports from Turkey. There were beautiful rugs, lamps, hookahs, etc.



On one display table there was a pile of beautiful blue and white glass disks. I said to my friend Guillermo, "Do you know what those are?" he did not know. I told him, "They are called 'The Evil Eye. You place them around to ward off the bad luck that comes from those who are envious of you or your possessions. It is an ancient symbol found throughout the Middle East, Greece, Italy, and even Latin America.'"

Jesus refers to the Evil Eye in our parable from Matthew, today. We will have to understand the cultural context of the story to understand what he is saying.

We, in our culture, tend to believe that there is "always more where that came from" whether it is money, oil, energy, or whatever. This makes it difficult for us to understand concepts such as shortages, limits, and extinction. Our Mediterranean ancestors in faith believed "There is no more where that came from:" whether wealth, jobs, or opportunities. Everything was limited in quantity and already distributed. You cannot come by anything more honestly.

The jobs at the vineyard were already filled. How dare any worker think there might be more jobs. To ask for a job is to deprive the employer of something he owns. That is shameful. The correct behavior is for workers to wait to be invited by the owner to work. In the parable the owner goes out five times looking for

workers to invite. Each time he invites everyone in sight. The owner and workers are behaving honorably.

The owner promises the first group hired "the usual daily wage." To the groups that come after he promises, "I will pay whatever is right." At the end of the day the owner pays the workers beginning with the last ones hired. The first ones hired, and promised the usual daily wage, observed the other groups getting paid.

The owner wears two hats employer and patron. A patron is a person of means who freely chooses to treat other people of lower status and less means "as if" they were family. That is what he does with those who were hired later. He treats them like family. If the owner wanted to, he could treat those first hired "as if" they were family. But he treats them as an employer. To the last ones hired he chooses to be their patron.

When the first-hired workers are paid last and the same they realize that they are nothing but hired hands. They are disgruntled. They can get even by casting the "evil eye" on the owner and his wealth. Our translation says, "Are you envious?" the literal Greek says, Is your eye evil. The Middle Eastern sense of envy is not simply a desire for something like another person has, for example, 'a vineyard like his.' It is a desire for 'exactly that very vineyard.' This means one desires the death of that owner, or at least the destruction of the very thing desired. The envious person hopes the owner of the object envied will lose it.

The point that Jesus is making is not economic. He is trying to tell us what God is like and how we deal with God. In a subsistence culture patronage mean survival for many. Are we grateful and see God as our generous patron? Or do we have an attitude of entitlement and are resentful or have an evil eye for what we think God owes to us?

Peace,

Fr Ron

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