

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 24, 2023

We are all born with a keen sense of justice and fairness. We all believe we should be treated equally; that none of us is better than anyone else. And when one of us is treated in a way we think is unfair, we all feel indignant.

This is a reality we experience from the earliest years of our lives. For instance, if a teacher brings a cake to school, all the students believe that they should get a piece. If the teacher decides to give two pieces to one student so that someone has to go without, all the students cry that it's unfair.

And we carry that same sense of fairness with us into our adulthood. We believe that equal work deserves equal pay. If one person puts in more time or takes on more responsibility, then we believe it's fair for that person to receive more. If this system breaks down and some people get paid what they do not deserve or others get paid less than they deserve, we work hard to set things right. That's because we realize that it might be us who ends up getting less than we deserve.

That's why all of us, when we listen to today's gospel, can't help but relate to the workers who labored all day but got the same wage as those who worked only an hour. Every fiber of our being wants to cry out, "But that's not fair!!"

It is true that our basic sense of fairness and justice works well for our relationships with our classmates, neighbors, and co-workers. But it does not work with our relationship with God. That's because God does not owe us anything. Everything we have is from our Heavenly Father. We cannot give Him anything that He does not already have. And there's nothing we could ever do to put Him in our debt.

It is so important for us to understand this and reflect on it frequently. Few attitudes kill the spiritual life as thoroughly as does a sense of entitlement. If I believe that God owes me something, I'm always going to be miserable. Nothing is ever going to be good enough. No amount of blessings will ever be enough. I will never be able to rejoice in another person's good fortune because I'll always be asking - what about me?

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But when I realize that everything I have and am is a gift of God, then I will cultivate a lively sense of gratitude. I will look at everything in my life - no matter how big or how small - as a blessing. I will always be giving thanks to God for just being alive. When I live with a sense of gratitude, then I will be happy for another person's good fortune. And I will also be more caring about people in need. Instead of holding on to what I have because I believe I'm entitled to it, I will give it away freely because I trust that God will bring even more blessings into my life. And when misfortune comes my way, I will be able to accept it as God's will with full trust that my Heavenly Father will find a way to bring good out of it.

That is the way God wants us to live. He wants us to understand that he provides for us every minute of every day. He wants us to be grateful for what we have. And He wants us to share it with others.

When Jesus told this parable, He was speaking to the religious leaders of His day. They were men who were whole-heartedly committed to living the faith that had been handed down to them from Moses. They were convinced the commandments had to be lived out right down to the letter if the people of Israel were going to survive. For that reason, many of them worked tirelessly to put the Law into practice themselves, and encouraged others to do so as well.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with that. The problem is when a sense of entitlement starts to creep in. Many religious leaders began to think that they were superior to others. They started to consider themselves to be righteous and to look down on others as sinners. Instead of treating others with mercy, they treated them with contempt. They began to be more interested in maintaining their power and standing in society than in helping others.

We Catholics can find ourselves showing the same attitudes that Jesus condemned in the religious leaders of His day. We can be so interested in following the rules that we overlook the people who need us. It can show itself in an unwelcoming attitude when people who don't usually come to Mass show up on Ash Wednesday and Christmas. It can also show itself when we become overly critical at the smallest changes. When that

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happens, we become too concerned with boosting our own egos and less willing to serve others.

That is why Jesus is flipping the tables on us in today's gospel. Many times, we are not as holy and righteous as we believe ourselves to be. The people we are tempted to look down on may actually be miles ahead of us spiritually.

If we find ourselves stuck in a judgmental attitude, there is a sure way to fix it - by getting busy in the Lord's vineyard. Maybe it's time for us to get dirty serving others. Perhaps we should get involved in a committee in our parish. Maybe it's time for us to see how the needy around us really live. We might just discover that they have a lot to teach us about humility and trusting in God's goodness. At the same time, we will actually be using our faith to do good for others rather than simply pumping up our egos.

Like the landowner in the gospel, Jesus is inviting all of us to labor in His vineyard. Each of us will be called at a different time in our lives. And each of us will be given a different task. But it is important that all of us respond, no matter what we are called to do and no matter when we are called to do it. God has a reward for us that will not disappoint us if we say "yes" with faith and total trust in His goodness.