

25th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (September 24, 2023)

Does this gospel leave you scratching your head a bit? It doesn't seem fair that everyone got the same wage even though they worked for different lengths of time. Disputes about fairness and justice are always with us; the Catechism speaks of justice as a matter of what is due or owed to another. Even our young people have a basic sense of fairness, and are often very quick to speak up:

--"Mom, she got a bigger piece of cake than I did—it's not fair!" And so you get out the tape measure and cut precisely equal pieces for everyone...and don't forget to make sure that everyone gets the same number of sprinkles...

--"Dad, all my friends get to stay out later on Friday night; why can't I? It's not fair!" At which point Dad launches into 'Well, when I was your age...', and teenage son rolls his eyes and thinks 'well, here we go again!'

Back to the parable: it sure does seem unfair, at least at first glance. The workers labored in the vineyard for widely-differing amounts of time, but they all got paid the same amount. Even if those who worked all day received what they agreed to, it seems unjust that those who worked only an hour or two should get the same amount. Can you imagine a factory or other business owner trying to get away with something like that?? But think about it: did that landowner defraud anyone? Did any worker not get what was agreed to? No—the landowner defrauded no one; not a single worker got less than what was promised. Instead, the complaint is about the landowner's generosity—those who worked all day thought he was way too generous to those who worked only a short time. The landowner put it to them directly: "Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?"

And that is the central point of this parable. Jesus gives us a needed lesson on the unbelievable, almost scandalous generosity of God. The landowner represents God who is always going out—at all times of the day, in all the stages of our lives, to seek us out. It is about God's desire and determination to invite everyone to come to him or come back to him if we have gone astray. Whether one has been an active and faithful Christian all of one's life or whether one has come to Jesus only late in life, God makes eternal life and joy in heaven fully and completely available to one and all.

Does this seem unfair or unjust? You may have learned about someone who lived a life of sin and selfishness, even to scandalous levels, but then—near the end of his/her life—experienced a genuine sorrow for sin and a real conversion to Christ. Back in the 1970's and '80's a man named Ted Bundy viciously assaulted and killed nearly thirty young women before he was arrested. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. The day before he was put to death in the electric chair, the authorities allowed James Dobson (from Focus on the Family) to interview Bundy. He told Dobson of his background and of his addiction to pornography that he said played a large part in his crimes. He also said that he had since come to accept the forgiveness of Jesus Christ and now believed in him. He was electrocuted the next day.

Was Bundy sincere in declaring his repentance? We don't know; only God knows. And it's very easy to be suspicious and cynical about such stories: "yeah, sure—he 'found Jesus' only because he knew he was going to die." But think about it: what better motive for repentance and conversion could there possibly be than knowing that you would soon be executed? Some folks may well need that proverbial two-by-four upside the head before realizing their need for God. If that repentance and conversion is genuine (and again, God alone knows that—we don't)—even if it comes only late in life or after a long history of sin and selfishness, would God offer that person eternal salvation in the way he would offer to someone who had been faithful throughout life? Or, to use the language of the parable: would the

divine landowner (God) give the same wage (eternal salvation) to everyone who accepted his invitation, no matter what time of day, at what stage in life they accepted that invitation? The answer is 'yes'. Remember the story of the good thief who was crucified alongside Jesus—the only reason he is called 'good' is because he turned in repentance to Jesus at the end of his sinful, thieving life. And Jesus' response was not 'sorry, thief—it's too late for you'; instead, it was 'this day you will be with me in paradise.'

Does this offend your sense of justice and fairness? If so, remember the first reading when God, speaking through Isaiah, said 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.' I'm certainly not recommending that we wait until the very end of life before coming to genuine repentance, thinking we can sin now and repent later. For one thing, there may not be a 'later'—death may come unexpectedly and out of the blue. On the other hand, as long as there is the breath of life within us, it is never too late to return to God. The reason is that divine generosity that knows no limits. Again from the prophet Isaiah: "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.'

Against God's unconditional and unlimited love for us and his burning desire for our salvation, our human ideas of what is just and fair can only crumble away. Let's not be envious of the generosity of God that may offend our limited notions of justice. After all, God does not owe any of us anything in the least. We can't in any way claim to deserve or merit or earn eternal life. It's God's gift, pure and simple—and it's all through Jesus Christ. Thank the Lord every day for the fact that his love and mercy are way, way beyond our own ideas of justice and fairness...for our own salvation depends on that very fact.