

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 55:6-9
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is near to all who call upon him.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 1:20C-24, 27A
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Open our hearts, O Lord, to listen to the words of your Son.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 20:1-16A

The 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of Matthew. It takes us to another one of Jesus's famous parables that's distinctive and unique to this particular gospel. It's the parable of the workers in the vineyard, and it is found in Matthew 20:1-16. So we are going to read through that gospel and then we will try to unpack it and interpret its meaning. It begins in this way... Jesus said:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them,

‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”¹

Let’s stop there. This is a fascinating parable in Matthew's Gospel. Notice that we have, yet again, a parable, or a teaching, that involves money, it involves economics. I can't help but note here that it's interesting that so many of the parables and teachings of Jesus that involve money are found in Matthew's Gospel in particular. Just like we saw the parable of the unforgiving servant and the talents, those economic parables are often found only in Matthew's Gospel. And you can't help but wonder if Matthew, who in chapter 10 is identified as a former tax collector, would have been drawn to the teachings of Jesus that involved money, that involved economics. In other words, those particular parables could have easily resonated with him as a former tax collector. So it is a kind of interesting example of how not only do you have external evidence that attributes the gospel to the apostle Matthew, you also have internal evidence in the gospel itself that corroborates the traditional attribution to the apostle, the former tax collector. In any case, this particular parable of the workers in the vineyard revolves around the hiring of day laborers and the wages that they receive.

So just a little bit of background here. The cultural setting that Matthew is imagining here is a situation where you would have a wealthy land owner, in this case the owner of the vineyard, who would hire out day laborers that were very common in first century Judaism. So a day laborer was a person who would go out into the marketplace or some public place and wait around in the hopes that some wealthy landowner might come and hire them for a temporary job. Basically the idea would be is that you would be hired for one day. You would go out into the field — or in this case to a vineyard — during the harvest season and you would work for a day's wage and then you'd be paid that day. So it was contract work, temporary work like that of a temp worker. So what is described here is the vineyard owner going out at daybreak around 6 AM — “early in the morning”

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Matthew says — and finding some of the day laborers there in the marketplace and inviting them to come to his vineyard so that they can begin to work the vines in order to harvest the grapes. So they start working at around 6 AM, and then as he is in need of more workers, he goes out at subsequent times.

Now the Revised Standard Version translates these literally as the third hour, the sixth hour and the ninth hour. But what it is really referring to in contemporary parlance is he goes out again at 9 AM — that's the third hour — then he goes out again at noon — which would be the sixth hour — and then he goes out again at the ninth hour — which would be 3 PM. And each time he goes out he brings in more laborers, as he finds these men standing idle in the marketplace, and invites them to come work in his fields. Now you'll notice there that the last group he goes to, it says he went to them at the “11th hour.” The 11th hour would be around 5 PM in the afternoon, and he says to them these interesting words, “why do you stand here idle all day?” So these guys have been waiting around for work for some time and they respond to him by saying “because no one has hired us.” And he says “okay, well you too, you come into my vineyard and work it.” Now in those days they couldn't put up spotlights or streetlights and work in the dark, they didn't have flashlights. So once the sun would set, the day's work was over in the field and you would have to wait until the morning to begin again.

So these guys are called at 5 PM to come and work the field. Now in verse eight it says that “when evening came” — which would be around 6 PM, right around sunset time — “the owner of the vineyard says to ‘call the laborers and give them their wages’, but start with the last and go toward the first.” I want you to feel the force of this, the difference between the first and last guys who were working the fields is pretty great when you really put it in context. The men who were called last work from 5 PM to 6 PM, they worked for one hour in the cool of the evening. The men who were called first worked from 6 AM to 6 PM, so they pulled a 12 hour shift in the heat of the day, as they said, “in the scorching heat,” harvesting the grapes. And as the owner of the vineyard starts to pay them, he starts with the guys who were hired at 5 o'clock and he gives them one denarius. Now as soon as the guys who started at 6 AM see that, their natural assumption is going to be “well if these guys got paid a denarius for one hours work, then I should make at least 12 times as much because I worked a 12-hour shift.” Instead the master gives them each the exact same, one denarius, no matter how long they worked. Now put

yourself in the shoes of the guys who got out there at 6 AM. I don't know if you ever pulled a day's labor out in the sun, out in the fields, outside doing yard work or whatever for 12 hours in the sun, it's not fun. It's hard work. And you can imagine that the guys who got there first thing in the morning were really upset, that what the master had done was unjust. It was unfair for guys who had come in at 5 PM, to work in the cool of the evening, to get the same amount of money that they got, working through the entire day.

So what's this all about? Well remember what Jesus did. He began the parable by saying “this is what the kingdom of heaven is like.” So every time Jesus gives a parable in Matthew’s Gospel — at least almost every time — he compares it to the kingdom. It's a story that's meant to illustrate the kingdom. And you might recall from earlier videos, as I've said, that there's always some kind of twist in the parables, or something unexpected in the parables. In this case the twist is that this vineyard owner is crazy. It seems unjust. It seems unfair. What person would pay someone who worked one hour the same wage as someone who worked 12 hours? It just seems crazy. At the very least it seems unfair, it seems unjust. So they start to grumble at the owner of the vineyard, and his response to them is the key. He says to them, first and foremost, I'm not unjust because you agreed with me for a denarius. So I haven't given you any less than you said you would work for. So he hasn't shortchanged them anything. That is the first point.

The second point is he says I can give whatever I want to whoever I want. In other words, am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? So another important point here is that the owner of the vineyard here is not being unjust because it's his money. He can give however much he would like to whomever he likes for whatever amount of work that they have performed. And then the third point is something very interesting there. He says “or do you begrudge me my generosity?” Now that is the English translation, the literal Greek here says this, “is your eye evil because I am good?” The imagery there is of an envious eye. So you will see this sometimes...the New Testament will talk about the lust of the eyes. That's the sin of envy. It is seeing someone else's possession, something that belongs to someone else, and desiring to take it for yourself, as if it belongs to you. And so what the master is saying here is that you are angry because I am generous, because your heart is envious for that which does not belong to you. That money

is his, it is not yours. It doesn't belong to you so you have no right to judge how he distributes it.

Now what is Jesus up to in doing this? Well it is very clear, he ends by saying “so the last will be first, and the first will be last” — which is one of his favorite refrains in the gospel. He's talking about, in essence, how the kingdom of God turns everything upside down. It turns our expectations about what is even just upside down. It turns upside down our expectations about what is owed to us. It turns them upside down as well, because God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts. And although we like to keep strict to the principle of justice — that everyone gets what is there due — God isn't like that. He is generous in a way that almost seems unjust to us, that's radical, that's exorbitant, and in some cases, can seem unfair. And it is easy to commit, in light of that, the sin of what some of the ancient Church Fathers called spiritual envy. That is that when we look at the gifts that God gives to others, we can be jealous of those gifts, we can be envious of those gifts, in the spiritual realm and in the spiritual life, if we don't understand.... “well why has God blessed this person more than he has blessed me?” It seems as if he's unjust. Well we know that God is not unjust, and that's actually the entire point not just of the gospel reading, but also of the Old Testament reading.

So if you go back to the Old Testament reading, it provides a kind of clue to Jesus' message in the parable. In Isaiah 55:6-9, the first reading says this:

Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Now most people who have heard that passage before kind of interpret it to mean that God is really, really, really smart. He's just so infinitely greater than us that his thoughts are so much higher than ours, that they are as high as the heavens are above the earth. And his ways are so much better than ours, that they are as high as the heavens are above the earth. And that's true, that is part of it, but what is the context there? What are the thoughts he's talking about? And what are the ways he's talking about? Well look back at that verse 7, what does he say? "Let him return to the Lord, that he might have mercy on him, to our God, that he might abundantly pardon." So the context there is the mercifulness of God and the forgiveness of God. So when Isaiah says that "my ways are not your ways" and "my thoughts are not your thoughts," he's talking about the ways of God's mercy. He is talking about the ways of God's pardon. He is talking about the ways of God's forgiveness. He is talking about the generosity of God's steadfast love. And that's really the background of the parable.

Although to us it might seem like God is being unjust in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, what he's actually being is merciful. Although to us it might seem like God is being unfair, he's actually being generous. And that's what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's the radical generosity of God. It's the radical mercy of God. It's just like we saw in the parable of the unforgiving servant. The unforgiving servant owed thousands of years worth of debt, and what did the master do? He forgave it with one word, just because the servant got down and asked for forgiveness. That seems crazy. That seems completely exorbitant, or we might say prodigal or gratuitous, but that's how God's love is, and that's how his mercy is, and that is what his forgiveness is like.

And if you have any doubts about that being the key theme, you can just look at the Responsorial Psalm for the day, because the Psalm is Psalm 145. The refrain is:

The Lord is near to all who call upon him.

Why? In verse eight? Because:

The LORD is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

So notice those two words. He's gracious and he's abounding in steadfast love. In other words, his love, his mercy and his salvation are abundant. He is generous in a way that we just aren't. He has a radical generosity towards us, because he ultimately made us and desires our salvation.

Now in closing, I want to end with a point from St. Augustine, because this is a fascinating passage in the Gospels. It raises the question of the rewards of eternal life. Think about it for a second. There are certain passages in the Gospel which suggest that we will have different rewards in eternal life. Think about, for example, the parable of the sower, where the seed is planted and some of it brings forth thirty fold, some sixty, and some a hundred fold. So not all of our fruits in the proclamation of the Gospel are going to be equal. You can think about the other parable of the talents, where the master entrusts certain amounts of money to the servants and they go off and make investments, and some come back and they get different levels of rewards based on how they have used the master's wealth. Whether they've invested it or whether they've hidden it and done nothing with it. So certain parables suggest that there are going to be different levels of reward in heaven. But this one seems to suggest that everyone gets the same reward, so how do we reconcile those with one another? St. Augustine pointed this out in his explanation of the parable of workers in the vineyard, and this is what he said about the reward of eternal life:

“In that great reward then, we shall all be equal—the first to the last and the last to the first. For the denarius stands for eternal life, in which all will have the same share. Although through diversity of merit some will shine more brilliantly than others, in the possession of eternal life there will be equality. What is endless for all will not be longer for one and shorter for another. What has no bounds will have none either for you or for me. Those who lived chastely in the married state will have one kind of splendor; virgins will have another. The reward for good works will differ from the crown of martyrdom; but where eternal life is concerned there can be no question of

more or less for anyone. Whatever may be the individual's degree of glory, each one will live in it eternally. This is the meaning of the denarius.²

So what is Augustine getting at there? He is saying that the parables that suggest that there are different rewards, and the parable that suggests that everyone gets one denarius, are both equally true from a different point of view. The parables about the different rewards have to do with our individual merits and our particular states of life, as well as the fruits that God's seed that is sown in our hearts will bear in the spiritual life — whether it's through evangelization and whatnot, like in the parable of the sower. So those parables that indicate different outcomes are about our individual merits, but the parable of the workers in the vineyard is about eternal life itself. If you think about it, that makes sense. To the extent that eternal life is nothing other than the possession of God, the vision of God, like the beatific vision and life everlasting, then we will all be equal in heaven, because everyone in heaven, in the kingdom of heaven, will see the face of God and experience eternal life. That is what the denarius represents.

And it doesn't matter whether you are saved at the last moment at the end of a very wicked life, whether you repent at the 11th hour so to speak, at 5 PM right before the final judgment, or before the moment of your death, or whether you're baptized as an infant and live a life of grace and holiness and good works and growth and merit and sanctity. Both those people, through God's abundant generosity and mercy, will receive the denarius of eternal life itself, of everlasting life in the eternal kingdom of God. So this parable is meant to reveal that to us, to help us understand that God's mercy is so radical that even if someone converts, even if they turn from sin at the 11th hour, at the very end of their life, they still can receive the joy and the grace and the blessing of the everlasting kingdom of God, of the vision of God and life in communion with God. And I think that that's a message that people need to hear. That's a message of hope. It is a challenging message because it paints a picture of a God who is so much more generous and merciful than we would ever be, but that's precisely why the news of Christianity is good news, because it means that there's always a place for those who come to the Lord with a contrite heart. As the Psalms say, the Lord will not reject a contrite

² Augustine, *Sermon 87*, 1.5-6; trans. E. Barnecutt

heart, because he is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...and gracious and merciful” towards us. That is what this parable is meant to demonstrate.