

## Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 55:6-9 and Matthew 20:1-16a

How many times this year have you cried out, "This is not how I pictured my life would be!"? It has been frustrating because we want things the way we want them. Life should go as we think it should. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard challenges us to examine our frustration because it can be spiritually damaging. The parable is not about whether we are late hires or early hires: all the workers play minor roles except those hired first. This is about the first workers who expect more for themselves when they see the landowner give the later hires the usual daily wage. They have set up for themselves how the world should work, i.e. in their favor. And in our heart of hearts, most of us see ourselves as "first," the ones who should get in, get the best and get the applause.

"Not us!" we exclaim. Yet how truly aware are we of others who cry, "This is not how I pictured my life!" every year all the time. They have the wrong skin color, the wrong gender or not enough money and their whole lives are limited by it. Like the workers hired first, however, we are not truly concerned. We choose when we want to address the struggles of others or even to see them. But we know they are there and we play along with the system so that we can continue to be first. E.g. When it comes to race, Fr. Bryan Massingale, a moral theologian at Fordham, notes that none of us had

*an explicit class on the ways of whiteness and how it works in society... It's just something that you know... At some early age, you realized that no matter how bad things got for you, at least you would never be black. And it dawned on you, though you rarely consciously say it, that you would never want to be black. Because you realized, even without being explicitly told, that being white makes life easier.<sup>1</sup>*

The landowner asks the disgruntled workers three questions, which get at the heart of frustrations over the loss of assumed privileges. The first is "Did you not agree with me for a denarius?" This was the usual wage for day laborers, a standard tit-for-tat contract. However, these workers had assumed an economic framework that did not exist. In our relationship with God, we often assume that salvation is also transactional. We think that we earn the right to go to heaven if we do certain things and, clearly, others have failed to do so. The landowner/God names this transactional perspective for what it is. And if that is how we look at things, the natural outcome is the next statement, "Take what is yours and go." There are problems with transactional spirituality: 1) If we really could save ourselves, why didn't we do so already? 2) Don't we want more in our relationship with God?

Next the landowner says, "I wish to give this last one the same as you. Am I not allowed to do what I want with my things?" God wants fullness of life for everyone and has an unlimited supply of it. If we cannot grasp the capacity of God, we must at least acknowledge that it is beyond our ken – and let it be. In this week's reading from Isaiah, which is part of the "Come to the water" invitation, God does not point out that God's thoughts are incommensurate with ours in order to dismiss us, but to awaken in us the reality that abundant life is possible. Amazingly, what God wants is to love each and every one of us. We are called to get out of the way of that superabundant generosity.

Finally, the landowner asks, "Is your eye wicked because I am good? In Mt 6, Jesus said, "The lamp of the body is the eye... if your eye is wicked, the whole body will be dark." In other words, how we choose to view things determines our whole moral status. This parable highlights the spiritual peril of being frustrated by God's generosity. If our response to seeing others acquire the same standard of living we have is anger, we have placed ourselves in the darkness of sin. An alarm bell is sounding: time to seek the Lord, and to do so in more than a transactional way.

- ❖ In what areas of life do you think you have earned respect? What do you think it should get you?
- ❖ Whom do you see being treated with little respect? What can you do to change that?

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<sup>1</sup> The Assumptions of White Privilege and What We Can Do about It," 20/06/01,

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/assumptions-white-privilege-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>, retrieved 20/09/14.