

# 25th Sunday Ordinary Time Reflection

Jesus told his disciples this parable:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

Going out about nine o'clock, the landowner saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, 'You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.'

So they went off.

And he went out again around noon, and around three o'clock, and did likewise.

Going out about five o'clock, the landowner found others standing around, and said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?'

They answered, 'Because no one has hired us.'

He said to them, 'You too go into my vineyard.'

When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman,

'Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.'

When those who had started about five o'clock came, each received the usual daily wage.

So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage.

And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day's burden and the heat.'

He said to one of them in reply,

'My friend, I am not cheating you.

Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?

Take what is yours and go.

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

Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?

Are you envious because I am generous?'

Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Mt 20:1-16a

When was the moment when something switched in their hearts?

They went out in the morning, as always, looking for a job. Luckily, they found it early. They got a job, a good wage and the day would not be wasted. Now it was work until the sunset, and they would be able to call it a good day. They could go home, have dinner with the family, a drink with friends. A good day.

That's not what happened; something changed in their hearts. A job that seemed like a gift from heaven in the morning became survival through toil and heat. A wage that seemed just and fair at dawn was perceived as oppressive and unfair in the evening.

Something dark crept into their hearts. When I grew up in Poland in the 1980's, we lived in a poor Communist country where everything was controlled and oppressive. It was not too oppressive, unless you tried to stand out. Almost everything was basically there, but never enough and never really good. You could dream, as long as the dreams weren't too big. You could plan, as long as the plan was not too ambitious.

Everything was weak and mediocre. There is a Polish saying that describes notorious optimists as those who look at the world through the "pink lens." We thought that we were forced to look at the world through the "grey lens." The logical reaction was to "go along" with reality: grey, mediocre, slightly bored with life, planning things that you would never pursue, complaining about things without attempting to change them. Life seen through the "grey lens."

Maybe something like the "grey-lens" disease, found its way to the hearts of the laborers from the story told by Jesus to his disciples. A combination of jealousy, entitlement, and pride that made them see things in a twisted way: without depth, without color, without flavor, and without meaning.

In the moment when their good day was to be crowned with a daily wage, they couldn't be happy about it. Goodness became a source of sadness and anger. The just wage that they used to be grateful for became offensive. The workers could not see any more that the day was good; that they did something good and that they made money for their families too.

They couldn't meet the true owner of the vineyard either. This clearly generous and sympathetic man, with great respect for them and, with love for the vineyard, became their enemy in their eyes.

Now that I've been a Catholic priest, all across America, for over twenty years, I see how deeply human that temptation is. I see how easily, even the simplest moments of meeting with God, prayer, Eucharist, could become a duty or a social function because I take them for granted. I can see how quickly I become a critic of other people's attempts to live better, just because I don't have courage to improve my own life. I see how profoundly I feel entitled to the best things because, deep in my heart, I am afraid that God is not generous. I can also see how much I can be jealous, that is sad because of somebody else's good, as I cultivate in myself the fear that God might one day abandon me completely. The "grey lens" makes God into a caricature and a projection of my fears.

The disease of spiritual "grey lens" is spreading to all the aspects of our culture. How about people who don't want to grow up because they think it's their parents' duty to support them? How about people who choose slavery to chemical substances or crushing ideologies because life seems too difficult to live? How about people who refuse to take creative risks because they presume, in their mind, that somebody else must provide for their security? What about those who are not honest or creative in public for fear of criticism because they very much doubt that God gave them any gifts and talents?

There is an increasing number of my brothers and sisters with an ever-growing list of demands that they are planning to submit to society, to the Church, and to God himself. They seem to be demanding swift and comfortable solutions without ever attempting to confront the problem, without risking reaching out to others, and without ever looking into their own conscience. Above all, definitely without a difficult and long battle of continual conversion.

The disease of the “grey lens” of entitlement is also touching our spiritual lives - where God is supposed to be the “genie” from Aladdin’s lamp to respond quickly to my every wish and to disappear when he is not needed. We are unwilling to trust in God’s way, who created us in this world to allow us to grow in freedom and love until we are ready to meet him face to face. Who constantly supports us with his grace, and who, in his generosity, even gives his Son into our hands.

Doubting the Creator is how the first become last. It is why those who may have even been the longest next to the landowner cannot recognize his goodness.

What can I do to be healed? In every time and in every culture, the answer is always the same: go back to meet the landowner, the Father of heaven and earth. Wake up from the slumber and open your eyes to see the generosity of the Giver of Life. By returning to the sacraments, allow yourself to be hired for HIS vineyard. The One who hires you offers you himself as the most amazing gift and honor, and whatever prize you imagine you will get is only the beginning, only the foretaste of his generosity.

That’s how the last become the first. The last because they knew they worked the least and they are the least deserving, and also because they are the most longing and the most grateful for the encounter with the generous landowner.