

The Lazy Ones?

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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How would you feel if you heard this Gospel read at a funeral mass? I'm guessing you would be really confused. What does this parable about laborers and payment have to do with death and mourning? If anything, this Gospel probably gets us worked up. We are upset whenever we hear that the lazy workers who only worked a few hours received as much pay as the hard-working people who worked all day. Luckily, chances are you will never hear this Gospel at a funeral.

The former bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, Bishop Ken Untener did choose this Gospel reading for his sister's funeral mass. While his family didn't understand why, in the homily he explained his choice. He explained that his sister, Alice, had many dreams for her life when she was young- a good job, being a wife and mother, being an independent thinker, etc. Being the victim of a violent crime at age 19, however, changed everything for her. Even doing the basics of life were difficult for her. She eventually developed a debilitating illness, lost her job, and died fairly young. Throughout the homily, he saw his sister's life in relation to the laborers who didn't work the whole day.

Acknowledging the awkwardness of Gospel selection for her funeral, he explained, "I guess it makes a great deal of difference in whose shoes you place yourself when you read this Gospel. Usually we think about the poor fellows who worked all day. But what if I put myself in the shoes of ones who didn't?" From this opposite perspective, he went on to say, "they stood there all day long and didn't have the good luck to be hired. They stood there and went

through the embarrassment of being passed over...of wanting to work but not being able to work.” That was Alice! It wasn’t laziness or living off the government, but the humiliation of wanting to be independent and take care of oneself, but of not being able to. If you think that the laborers who started later in the day were lazy, re-read the parable. Notice that each time the landowner goes to the marketplace, the laborers are already there waiting. He even asks them, “why do you stand here idle *all day?*” Their answer was, ‘because no one has hired us.’ They wanted to be chosen and wanted to work, but weren’t asked. They, too, bore the heat of the day, albeit in a different way.

Many people in our world are in a similar position. Due to circumstances beyond their control- illness, growing up in poverty, having a disability, being part of an oppressed group, or just plain old bad luck- these people suffer doubly. They have to face their personal struggles as well as their social struggles. That in itself should make us more sympathetic. Perhaps the humiliation of being passed over is as painful as bearing the heat of the day’s burden. God, like the landowner, seems to think so. Bishop Untener concluded his sister’s funeral homily by saying, “sometimes we take our good luck too seriously. We begin to think that it is all our own accomplishment. That was the mistake of the laborers in the Gospel who were hired early. They actually thought that they were better than the others. They weren’t. They were just lucky.” (31-32)

God is equally generous with all of us, including those who are constantly passed over in life.

As we continue with this mass, maybe not convinced and still a little upset with this Gospel that seems to favor laziness, let us instead hear God ask us this question: are you envious because I am generous?