

Fr. Curtis Miller      October 3-4, 2020      Homily for the 27th Sun. of Ordinary Time

In this parable, the vineyard tenants display wanton disregard for human dignity and life. They mistreat the messengers sent by their master, and ultimately even kill their master's son. It is a disturbing story of cruelty. Interestingly, Jesus is telling it to the High Priests and Pharisees on the Monday of Holy Week, just days before He will live out its literal meaning. For centuries, the people of Israel had mistreated the prophets sent to them by God, those who had preached God's message of repentance. Now, these leaders of the people were about to commit the ultimate offense of sending Jesus, the Son of God, to His death on the cross. This is the worst moment of human history, the triumph of death and evil. And yet, by the divine power of His love, Jesus transforms this moment into the greatest triumph of life and goodness in His resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Today/tomorrow is Respect Life Sunday. On this day, we pray in a special way for a greater respect for human life, and for the legal protection of every human life from conception until natural death. In the Paschal Mystery of Holy Week, we see the struggle between those who do not respect human life, and the power of God the Father Who gives us life, and Jesus Who restores us to a truly abundant life.

Twenty-five years ago, Pope St. John Paul II released his encyclical letter, *Evangelium Vitae*, on the Gospel of Life. In this letter, the pope contrasted what he called the culture of death, our society's embrace of sins against human life, with the glorious power of Jesus' Gospel of Life. These two forces exist side by side in this world. Often, it seems like the culture of death is more powerful, but we who have faith in Jesus know that His Gospel of Life will ultimately win out. But in the meantime, it is our responsibility as Christians to promote the message of the Gospel of Life.

In this letter, the pope lists the various sins against human life that have become prevalent in our culture today, such as abortion and euthanasia. He also wrote controversially against capital punishment, the death penalty, arguing that there are very few (if any) instances in which it is morally permissible.

But the pope does not just list negative things to be avoided. He writes that the Gospel of Life is something positively to be lived, namely Jesus' call to "care for every other person for whom God has made us responsible" (EV 87). It is as if the pope is providing an answer to the sarcastic question of Cain, after he has slain his brother Abel, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes. Yes, we are all the keepers of our sisters and brothers. We bear a God-given responsibility for each person, and we are to do all in our power to protect every human life, especially of those who are most vulnerable.

It is no secret that the Church is strongly opposed to abortion, and that we Catholics are morally obligated to oppose it in our voting and other public activities. But

the reason is that we see and recognize the unborn as our vulnerable sisters and brothers, whom we ought to love and cherish, and for whom we are responsible. With the upcoming election, I will have more to say about this topic, but it's important to remember that this is not primarily a political issue, but rather an act of love for our fellow human beings. If we lose sight of that, being pro-life will just become a partisan political issue. This is a position that should be held by all people of good will, regardless of the prevailing trends and attitudes in society and politics.

We Christians are called to recognize the dignity of all our sisters and brothers, and to act in ways that affirm this dignity, through concrete acts of love and service. One powerful example of this comes from the life of St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day is this weekend, but which is superseded by Sunday. At the time of St. Francis, one of the most marginalized groups of people were lepers. On top of being afflicted with a terrible disease, these poor sufferers had to endure social rejection by people who were afraid of contracting this disease themselves. The young St. Francis, sad to say, was no different from his contemporaries in his fear of and disgust for people afflicted with leprosy. At best, he could bring himself to throw a coin to a beggar with leprosy, then hurry away as fast as he could. Yet St. Francis felt Jesus inviting him to overcome his fear and show true human love to a leper. So one day, when Francis saw a leper begging, when he felt the urge to run away, instead he stopped to press a coin into the man's withered hand and embrace him with a warm hug. That leper probably felt, for the first time in a long time, that he was a human being, with human dignity. Likewise, St. Francis felt elated to have overcome his fear and to have affirmed someone else's humanity. Whenever we step outside of our comfort zone to recognize someone's human dignity, we will feel that same joy.

Where does human life get its dignity? From God Himself, Who creates each human being in His own image and likeness. This gives humans a higher dignity than any of God's other creatures. We each possess a divine spark, a likeness to God, in our spiritual nature, our immortal souls, our intelligence, and in our freedom to choose good.

Let us use our freedom to choose life, to affirm human dignity, and embrace every human being—the unborn child, the poor, the sick, the stranger, and the elderly—as our sisters and brother in Christ.