

Sept. 20, 2020 St. Augustine Cathedral/Crowley Center 11:30 a.m.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In the interests of full disclosure, I want to let you know that, as I looked at these Readings earlier this week, and realized that this Gospel passage was included, my first thought---very honestly---was: “Oh no!”, followed immediately by a quick prayer to the Holy Spirit to begin helping to really guide my preparations for today’s Homily.

This Parable of Jesus, sometimes known as “the Parable of the Landowner”, and at other times referred to as “the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard”, is one of those that a number of Scripture scholars refer to as “the hard sayings of Jesus”, meaning that those “sayings” are hard for many people to understand, they’re difficult to interpret, and I for one can add in regard to today’s particular Parable, also quite challenging to preach on. Jesus tells this Parable literally right before He shares with His Apostles His third reminder about what will happen to Him when they get to Jerusalem, and just days before He actually enters into that Holy City of Jerusalem amidst people shouting and chanting: “Hosanna to the Son of David!” So, this is a “hard saying” because Jesus is teaching extremely important lessons which deal with very serious matters.

But we also need to keep in mind that the primary reason, as we’ve heard said many times as to why Jesus uses “Parables” to teach, is because He’s trying to help us understand the “mysteries of God” and what the “Kingdom of Heaven” is like. And since those spiritual realities are outside our own lived experience, Jesus---the great Teacher that He is---keeps looking for ways to help us come to some level of understanding by using examples from our lived experience.

Today’s Parable, in which Jesus tells of a Landowner hiring “day workers” to work in his vineyard, and paying them all the same, agreed-upon “daily wage” no matter how many, or how few, hours they worked that day, might very well leave us scratching our “proverbial” heads. As we remember very well, the Landowner was hiring “day workers”, and, as we heard Jesus set up the premise of the Parable, *“the landowner 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.”*

So the important piece in how Jesus frames the Parable is that these are workers who agree to do whatever the job is for an agreed-upon daily wage; they weren’t hired to work for an “hourly rate”. They knew in advance that at the end

of the work day---and for those hired at dawn, that would mean basically a 12-hour work day---they knew what amount they would be paid, because they had agreed to it when they were hired.

But where Jesus makes the Parable much more challenging is that the Landowner goes back out to the marketplace 4 more times during the day---at 9:00 a.m., Noon, 3:00 p.m. and at 5:00 p.m.---and does the same thing, making the same arrangement, and telling the laborers that: *"I will give you what is just."* So, then comes the end of the work day, at 6:00 p.m., and the Landowner sends his foreman to give the workers their pay, but to begin with those hired last, and end up with those hired first. Well, we know that as those hired at 6:00 a.m. watched closely and saw that those hired at 5:00 p.m. were being paid the same amount as they were to be paid, they then assumed that when the foreman came to pay them, they would get much more. But no, they got the agreed-upon wage. Those hired first and who worked 12 hours felt unfairly treated, and complained to the Landowner, who replied: *My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?.....Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?.....Are you envious because I am generous?"* And that's when Jesus makes His point: *"Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last."* We might add slightly to that sentence to read: *"Thus, the last one to be hired will be paid as much as the first; and the first one hired will be paid the same as the one hired last."*

Something tells me that our sense of whether this parable is just or unjust is where we might see ourselves in the parable: If we see ourselves as having been working in the Vineyard all our lives and doing our best to follow Jesus, we might agree with those workers who were hired at 6:00 a.m., and cry "Foul"! But, if we see ourselves as those who have just come to follow Jesus, like those who were hired to work in the vineyard at 5:00 p.m., well we would probably think that what the Landowner did was not only just, but very generous!

But what Jesus is really trying to teach us is that while we tend to make judgments on what we consider to be fair, right and just; God makes His judgments based on: love, mercy, and forgiveness.

So, that ties perfectly into today's First Reading from the Prophet Isaiah who clearly tells us on God's behalf: *"My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways."* And then God continues reminding us: *"As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are My ways above your ways, and My thoughts*

above your thoughts.” Our prayer to God, more often than not, may very well be: “Lord God, please make Your ways consistent with my ways”; please change Your Will so that it reflects more what my will is. But, that’s not the way it works.

The basic message God has given throughout all of Scripture, and the primary reason why God has revealed Himself to us in the first place----is so that we can get to know our Creator as our Loving Father, Who loves us unconditionally, whether we deserve it or not. And that is certainly the reason why, “in the fullness of time”, God sent us His only-begotten Son, Jesus, to be as Human to us as a Brother, but also to be as Divine as it would take for Him to redeem us and all people, for all time, thru His suffering, death and resurrection, to save us from our sins.

So what Jesus does in His teaching is to help us to come to understand those “mysteries of God” and to appreciate what the Kingdom of God is like, which Jesus came to establish in this world, even by using “hard sayings” and “difficult to understand and to preach about Parables”. But beyond what Jesus teaches, what is equally formative is what Jesus does: in the example He sets for us, in the new Gospel standards that He provides for us, in how Jesus “raises the bar” in regard to how we are to treat one another as Jesus shows us, and in Jesus’ command that we are to “deny ourselves, take up our cross each day, and follow Jesus”---that we are to show our greatness by being the servant of all---that we are to forgive one another 70 times 70 times----and that we are to love one another as He loves us.....none of which comes naturally to any of us, and all of which takes a lifetime of ongoing conversion from selfishness to selflessness.

Yes, all of that reminds us over and over again that God’s ways are not our ways, but God’s ways are the best ways, and the ways that lead us to Life. While we may very well spend a good bit of our time and energy and education in our human lives earning a living, getting promotions, and fighting for equality and fairness in the marketplace, we also need to spend even more energy spiritually coming to realize that we do not earn God’s love. We also need to realize that, while we should definitely follow all God’s commandments and live according to Jesus’ Gospel, and to follow the teachings of the Church, that doesn’t mean that somehow, automatically, we “deserve” a place in Heaven, nor that God “owes us” anything.

Now, who do we know that acts just like that? Parental Love and Family Life rooted in God’s ways act the very same ways. Parents don’t love their children

out of a sense of obligation or “fairness”. They don’t give their babies milk, or provide food for their children, conditioned only on whether they’re good or not. They don’t provide a comfortable bed, warm clothes, and a safe home only if the children measure up to certain criteria. Parents give generously, and self-sacrificially, to their children because they love them, pure and simple. In many ways, every parent here might very well say to their children what we heard God saying to all of humanity: My ways are not your ways. And it takes children a long time---until they grow up and mature---before they might come to realize that.

So, if that’s true on a human level, just imagine how much more true that is for God. We can’t possibly think that we can understand why God would love us unconditionally, especially as we look at our world and see all the hate, violence, anger, divisiveness, and Godless ways on the part of so many of us; and yet, He does. He loves those who come to Him “first”; He loves those who come to Him “last”; He loves all those who come to Him always!

Ultimately, no matter what we do in this world, in the final analysis, we have the same dilemma to deal with as St. Paul laid out in today’s brief, but profound, Second Reading from his Letter to the Philippians: *“If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me”; But if I die, I gain complete and eternal union with Christ.* So Paul says: *“I do not know which I shall choose; I am caught between the two.”* Paul describes the tension we might at times feel. But, since we don’t decide when our life in this world comes to an end----only God decides that----then, the only thing to do, to resolve the dilemma, is to follow Paul’s direction: *“Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ.”*

So, yes, sometimes God’s Word is difficult to understand; and sometimes Jesus’ sayings are “hard” to grasp, “hard” to put into practice, and even “hard” to preach about. But, God’s Word is always spoken so that we will come to know, love and serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him in the life of the world to come.

Our whole reason for being in this world is to do what Isaiah told us in our First Reading: *“Seek the Lord while He may be found, call Him while He is near”*, and to accept the fact that God’s ways are much better than our ways. God is not fair; He is infinitely more than fair. God is our Loving Father. He has given us everything He has, including His only-begotten Son. He doesn’t ask us to repay Him. He asks us only to Love Him, by loving one another---first, last and always.