



25th Sunday (A)

September 21, 2008

1 Isaiah 55:6-9

Philippians 1:20c-24, 27

Matthew 20: 1-16a

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IS THIS HOLY JUSTICE?

Adults as well as children love stories, especially from life. Stories put the meat on the skeleton for us. One of the wonderful things about raising children with stories is that imagination is developed and great lessons in life are able to be taught in ways they grasp. I am convinced that adults appreciate that same way of learning.

Look at how Gospels appeal more than the Letters of St. Paul. This is not to disparage St. Paul, only to point out that it is difficult to find much imagery in a lot of his letters and teachings, and to some a bit hard on the ears with what is perceived as his manner of preaching.

Many of Jesus' teachings are through the use of parable, stories. The beauty of his stories, these parables, is they will leave us thinking. They are open-ended for the hearer to determine the direction the story may be going, or its ending. Telling them the way he did, Jesus put his message in these stories in the context of their daily lives. Today's parable is one such good example. If the story is good, it will lead you into some serious reflection. And, believe me; this particular one can – if we listen – to what Jesus may be trying to say.

Justice? Where is it in the way the owner pays his people? We certainly would not want this kind of treatment of any laborer in this day and age. Jesus himself would not treat anyone like this landowner. Where is the mystery in this story, the point that he wants to make? That is the strength and beauty of the parable. It leaves you and me to ponder, and not just once, what has been said and decide something for ourselves.

Picture this landowner hiring laborers for his vineyard. He shakes their rough hands, and invites them to work for him. He guarantees the usual daily wage and satisfied smiles are evident. A good start for him and those who will work in his fields.

It is a hot day to begin with and it gets hotter as the day goes on. About noon, he goes out to the marketplace seeking more laborers. He finds some loitering, leaning against buildings; they are bored and their sagging bodies show it. He approaches them and they come to life, eager to work. He offers them the opportunity to join his crew in the fields.

An hour before quitting time, he goes to town again, and again, for whatever reason, he comes across some men loitering in doorways. The day is almost over, and their bodies are soaked with sweat from the heat of the day, dejection, and no work. He comes along and offers them the chance to do work in the time left for some work. They accept the opportunity, little though it may offer. They emerge from their lethargy and go off to pull weeds for about an hour or so. They don't hurry. They walk. This group is in no hurry. Not much in this deal for them.

Days end and the Gospel tells us, "usual daily wages" were handed out. Put yourself there with them, in the midst of them. Do you deserve wages for a full day's work you have done? – Half day's work? - An hour's work? Watch their faces. Watch your own. They all get a full day's wages. Put yourself among them, as one of them, some of you having worked full time, some part time, and some a very little time. The exact same amount for every worker. Hot anger is evident. Rights are demanded by the hard workers of the day, and sheepish smiles on the faces of the late-comers.

This is not an easy parable to work with. The explanation offered here and elsewhere is not a simple answer but provocative of more thought and prayer. What if God is the landowner? I'll ask you now to keep yourself in the scene with the workers and the owner. *This time I want you to focus on the owner's face.* You will have a direction or an answer to your questions, your doubts, your confusion, - perhaps both, - in that face, the kindness in that face, or perhaps not one at all, or one you like. While we want to focus on the faces of the day and half-day laborers, look to the faces of those late-comers. *Remember the original gloom of those hired so late? See their amazement now.*

Jesus was asking his listeners to look beyond remuneration for labor well done or not. He was asking them to begin to think about God's love for them. It would take more than a parable for them to realize this, but this was just one step in that direction. His listeners were called to consider what has been given them from a fond heart.

In trying to understand this parable and others, when we are asked to consider "justice," we don't want to dismiss fair wages and the like in our lives but the parables are not intended to be a study in economics. Start with the understanding of the term, "*justice, God's fidelity, God's faithfulness to all his creation whether deserved or not.*" We can be jealous because God is generous to others who haven't merited God's mercy and forgiveness. But then we are not called to believe that salvation depends most of all on our meriting it.

A way out explanation? Maybe, but challenging. *Compare this parable to the deep grace God's fond heart must be giving, and trying to give, to the people in this world who suffer and are left behind.* It is hard to fathom. No matter who we are, we are called to recognize God's fond heart and provident care for the greatest to the least. We do believe that, and we keep believing that. *We will only believe it as a people trying to respond to the love and fidelity God shows us, to realize we do not merit God's love. It is pure gift.*

I will end with a prayer of Blessed Peter Faber, one of the founders of the Society of Jesus, for staying balanced enough, body and soul, and giving God his rightful place in our lives:

*I beg of you, Lord,
to remove anything which separates
me from you and you from me.
Remove anything that makes me unworthy
of your sight, your control, your reprehension,
of your speech and conversation,
of your benevolence and love.
Cast from me every evil
that stands in the way of my seeing you,
hearing, tasting, savoring, and touching you,
being conscious of your presence
and, as far as it may be, enjoying you.
this is what I ask
and earnestly desire. Amen.**

*Peter Faber. in: Hearts On Fire. ed. Michael Harter, SJ Inst. Jes. Sources. St. Louis, MO. 1993, p.25