

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

I grew up in a big household; I was one of eight children. Was there competition for scarce resources? Yes. Like, for example, whenever my mom baked a cake, being able to eat the cake batter out of the bowl. Usually, one of my more alert brothers or sisters made it to the kitchen before I did. And then when I walked in and saw him or her happily enjoying it, I would often say something along the lines of, “Mom! That’s not fair! She got it last time!” Or, “I never get it!” Well, my poor mother certainly had plenty of other things to keep track of than who got the cake batter last time, but I was outraged, as though a grave injustice had just been perpetrated on the human race.

The question of God’s fairness comes up in our Gospel reading today, specifically in the parable that Jesus tells his disciples about the landowner who hires day laborers to work in his vineyard. Listening to it, I think that the question of fairness is a common

one. And in a way, it makes sense: does it really seem fair for one person who works far less than another to receive the same pay? What incentive is there to follow the Lord throughout our whole lives – and truly living as one of his disciples is definitely not easy at times and can indeed be very challenging – when we could just hopefully have a deathbed conversion? After all, if ultimately we will end up in heaven either way?

Well, here are a few responses to that. First let me just mention that I think counting on being able to live a wild life doing whatever we want and then having the so-called deathbed conversion is not a good strategy when it comes to our eternal salvation. How sincere would our conversion be anyway? After all, no one can fool God. God knows our hearts perfectly, even better than we know them.

Second, while being a true disciple of the Lord – and by that I mean not just calling ourselves a disciple but actually living as one – is also its own reward. As challenging as it is, it is always better than

the alternative. Living a life of virtue is not easy: it means saying no to ourselves a lot. I like the analogy with living a healthy lifestyle. We all know what this involves: good diet, regular exercise, getting more sleep, everything in moderation. And so that also means all the things we have to say no to: sugar, lounging around and being sedentary, staying up late watching TV or the internet, indulging as much as possible in all those things we like. If a good diet, regular exercise, getting more sleep, and everything in moderation were easy and enjoyable, and the opposite of those things difficult and repulsive, then of course everyone would be fit and healthy and well-rested and well-balanced. But we all know that that is not the case, and we all know how difficult it is for us to be those things ourselves.

But, as challenging as it can be to eat a good diet, exercise regularly, and so on, and it certainly seems more difficult than the alternative, we all know that being in shape and well-rested and so

on is ultimately much more satisfying than not. Jerry Seinfeld joked about our today self and our tomorrow self. Our today self goes out at night, stays up late, indulging in food and drink, and doesn't worry about the tomorrow self. "That's his problem; he can just deal with it!" But then the next morning, the today self blames the yesterday self: "Why did I stay up so late? Why did I have those extra drinks? Now I feel terrible."

In the same way, following God's will – not just with words, but also with deeds, with how we live every aspect of our lives – ultimately is better than following our own will. As hard as it can be to do God's will, even when it means denying our own will, we will be better for it and we will experience greater peace and satisfaction for doing so. I think we even experience this greater sense of peace almost immediately. However, we do not experience all the fruits of doing God's will and being one of his disciples in this life.

Another point about the question of God's fairness in this parable is that we might see our relationship with God as mostly or purely transactional. That is the case with the laborers who are hired by the landowner early in the day. The Gospel says, "After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard." An agreement was made between the landowner and the laborers: they would spend that day working in his vineyard, and then he would give them a certain amount of money. But when the landowner went out towards the end of day and saw others standing around idle, he just said to them, "You too go into my vineyard." There was no discussion at that time of how much they would be paid.

Do we see our relationship with God as more transactional or legalistic, like the laborers who were hired in the morning? If I do these things, I expect this reward from God. I will do nothing more, and I expect nothing less from him. Or do we see our relationship

with God as relational? I am the Lord's disciple, and because I am his disciple I will strive to do his will. Doing God's will is a privilege and its own reward. In addition to this is the belief that one day this relationship with the Lord will be fulfilled: perfected and purified and made whole.

Another point about this parable has to do with the wages that the laborers receive: as we know from the parable, the ones who worked all day received the same daily wage as the ones who only worked for just a little bit at the end of the day. Our ultimate reward is of course heaven: it is eternal beatitude or happiness with God in heaven. It is an infinite gift that we cannot measure or comprehend. Infinite is infinite. There is no such thing as infinity plus one.

But there are other parables in the Gospels that seem to suggest that there are some who will receive a greater reward in heaven than others. What about the parable in Luke's Gospel about the servants who received different amounts of money – called

talents in the parable – one who received ten and made ten more; another who received five and made five more, and one who received one talent and buried it and only returned the one talent back to his master, and then this one talent was taken from him and given to the servant who had received ten. St. Thomas Aquinas commented on this question of whether some receive a greater reward in heaven than others. What he said is that the gift God gives to all those who go to the heaven is the same objective gift: eternal life, eternal happiness with God. But how that gift is experienced or received is subjectively different: those who led more virtuous lives here on earth and were more conformed to God's will in this life are able to receive or experience more of God's love. Think of it as two glasses of different sizes: they can both be filled up, at which point they have both received the maximum amount they are capable of receiving. But one glass has a greater quantity of the beverage than the other one.

And a final point about this parable of the landowner and the laborers is that it is one more sign of God's love and mercy: that His love for us is so great, and His mercy is so great, that He gives us up to the very last moment of our life here on this earth to repent and be saved. His love and mercy are so great – indeed, infinite – that we simply cannot comprehend them. And that makes sense too. For how can finite creatures such as we fully comprehend God who is infinite?

- **September 20, 2026 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**