

Homily (25th Sunday of Ordinary Time) – 9/24/2017

There is a true story about an idealistic young man who visits an elderly monk in a monastery. The young man asks the monk, "So, you do still have temptations by the evil one? Do you still wrestle with the devil?". "No", replied the old monk. "I used to when I was younger, but now I've grown old and tired and the devil has grown old and tired with me." And the young man asked, "So, your life is easy then no more big struggles?". "Oh, no!", replied the old man. "Now, it is worse. Now, I wrestle with God!". Surprised by the words of the monk the young man said, "You wrestle with God and you hope to win?". "No!", said the old monk, "I wrestle with God and I hope I lose."

There comes a time in life when our major religious struggle is no longer the fact that we are weak. Or that we need God's mercy. There comes a time when our major religious struggle is not so much that we desperately need God's forgiveness. It is just the opposite.

We struggle with the fact that God does not fit neatly into our idea of him. We struggle with the fact that God does not appear to act logically or even fairly. This is especially true when it comes to his sense of justice. His mercy seems freely given away. Often without any merit by the one who receives it. To those who have been faithful as well as those who have not been faithful. Even to those who jumped on board at the last minute at the 11th hour. That is what today's gospel parable story can stir up in us.

You and I, in our own way, have experienced this gospel story about the vineyard workers. The ones coming at the last hour and getting a full day's wage. Have you ever been shopping say at the supermarket and you push your cart up to the checkout line the one that you saw was the shortest? And, you look over at that other checkout line, it looks like a traffic jam on I-85. So you picked the shortest line. You might be second in your chosen line. But that is a lot better than the other line of customers who stand stacked behind each other like sardines in a can.

However, as you stand in line, the woman in front of you, you know the one with just a few items in her shopping cart takes out her check book to pay. And the youthful Food Lion cashier realizes that this lady's check is from the National Bank

of Transylvania. The checkout cashier says, "I am going to need the manager to say it is okay to accept this check." She calls on the store phone for the manager. But the manager is slow to respond. In fact, he is nowhere to be found. In the meantime the customers in the line you did not pick, they are speeding along and out the door like they are in a NASCAR race. Soon shoppers, who came in the store long after you hustle through the line you did not choose but you are left standing there with your false ideas about life being fair.

That is how those first listeners must have felt hearing this parable by Jesus. Where is the sense of fairness? Where is the justice? Paying the last workers who come at the 11th hour the same as the first? Wait until the union boss hears about this!

Well the story is not meant to serve as a comment on social justice. In fact God's attitude to rich landowners is spelled out in the previous chapter of Matthew's gospel. And also Jesus teaches that the laborer is worthy to be paid for his work. But in giving this parable Jesus wants to say something deeper. You see Jesus is aiming his story at those first followers, his disciples. It is a warning about their smug attitudes. Gentiles, non-Jews, are starting to follow Jesus. And the Jews look on Gentiles as lower than dirt.

So, the parable is meant as a warning to them. "Don't think" Jesus is saying "just because you have been close to me so far, you are now the favored few for all time." And then he adds the last shall be first.

Look at it this way, you came to church today. And you drove past dozens and dozens of homes... and no one in those homes has any intention of worshipping in church this weekend. To get to church you drove past dozens and dozens of cars. And most people in those cars, like most Americans, do not attend Church on Sunday.

Yet they might very well welcome us into heaven. Are we jealous just like those first disciples, because God is generous?

Well, yeah! Does it bother us when others are given unmerited gifts and unearned forgiveness. You bet! Something in you and me reacts negatively when it seems life is not making others pay the same dues that we are paying.

We are living on the normal natural level where most people live. But God is coming from a different place. He does not live on that level. And the entire gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to go beyond the natural level. Invites us to go beyond the way the world works.

You know many saints believed in the end, God will save everyone even the Hitlers. These saints believed in hell or the possibility of forever excluding ourselves from God. Yet because they believed even more in God's love, a love so powerful, so inviting that ultimately even those who are in hell will see the error of their ways. They even believed the final triumph will be when the devil converts and hell is empty. If this bothers you, is your relationship with God really a love affair or is it a law and order affair?

Are we like those first disciples, jealous, because God is generous?