

# Homily for the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Times

September 23-24, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9; Philippians 1:20C-24, 27A; Matthew 20: 1-16A

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When I was a kid and complained, “That’s not fair,” my dad, the smart-aleck philosopher, always delivered a quick response with a twinkle in his eye and a little twitch at the corner of his mouth: “Nora Ellen, *life* isn’t fair.”

Then I would groan and complain some more because his words were of no help to an 8-year-old at her wits end. When I was in the middle of some dispute with my sisters or was being denied my absolute need to stay up a half hour past my bedtime or my absolute right to just one more cookie, “*Life* isn’t fair,” was *not* what I wanted to hear.

Despite my father’s admonitions, I do still expect life to be fair. Experience should have taught me otherwise. Most evidence is to the contrary. And yet this expectation persists. When I treat others kindly I expect them to be nice back. When I’m doing good, bad things shouldn’t happen to me...right? Well, no. Dad was right. Life isn’t fair.

I remember talking with a friend about this Gospel—the Workers in the Vineyard. “I *hate* that reading,” my friend said. “Really?” I answered, a little surprised. She’s someone with a great fondness for scripture. “Yes, it’s so unfair.” The last folks to get hired get paid a full day’s wage, the same as everybody else. It really bothered her. She’s a conscientious, stay-late and be-sure-all-the-work-is-done kind of person. This one really gets under her skin. And I guess she’s right—it isn’t fair.

Into the midst of all this unfairness comes our first reading. An inoculation against the idea that God should behave the way we do. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” God has this annoying habit of doing the unexpected, choosing the lowly, welcoming the outcast, breaking the rules, and then saying, “This is how I do things.”

It’s crazy.

This gospel is one of the parables Jesus uses to explain God's crazy dream *The kingdom of heaven is like...* a king who forgives, a pearl, a treasure, yeast, a mustard seed. Abundant, infectious, surprising—those are all pretty safe and even comforting metaphors. But in this one Jesus has us church-folk squarely in his sights. He's preaching to the choir here—to the ones who have already been working in the vineyard, all day. "Are you envious because I am generous?" the landowner asks. Other translations render this phrase, "Is your eye evil because I am good?"

I remember seeing a bumper sticker that made me laugh out loud: God loves everybody, but I'm his favorite.

This gospel is a caution, against jealousy, against self-righteousness, against entitlement. God loves others too. *We are* his favorite. Each of us. And all of us. Even the least, the lost, the latecomer. We've already got the infinite, total, and complete love of the Creator of the Universe. What more could we want?

So much of the poison in the world right now is because folks are worried that someone else might get ahead of them, or someone we see as below us seems to be getting more than we think they deserve.

We struggle with this story because in a wealth hoarding society this contrary notion that everyone gets a complete reward makes us balk. We don't get it.

It's not fair.

What this story tells us is that our notions of fairness don't even factor in. That with a God whose love is unending, who doesn't give us what we deserve but instead is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness," with that God, we don't have to worry about our reward. We only have to follow Paul's admonition from the second reading: "Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ."