

Homily for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 19-20, 2020

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

Preacher: Susan Howard

But that's just not fair!!

This week's Biblical account can dredge up strong feelings of injustice, when we hear of someone receiving more money for less work. Or on the other hand, seeing some get chosen to work while we are left behind.

Let's check in with the anger these wounds uncover and acknowledge it. How could God, the landowner in this parable, be so unfair? Well to be clear, God's economy is not based in capitalism, nor is it based on democracy. Nor is it based in socialism or demagoguery nor dictatorship. God does not live in a black and white world. God's economy is free and a blind giftedness, generosity beyond all our imagining! We just need to show up!

To even glimpse at the magnitude of God's ways we have to delve into the process of Christian or religious imagination. No doubt your heart is being torn to pieces by the current civil unrest, the myriad of conflicting messaging about how to combat the worldwide pandemic, the global economic downfall and the loneliness due to social isolation. We are experiencing more than ever the loss of interconnectedness that we all yearn for, and a return to our peace-filled ways of life.

This unrest is about old wounds—of being chosen last for far too long. They are sacred wounds that need healing with patience and tenderness. It may be difficult for you to enter into this teaching right now, but time is of the essence. Our very existence as a civilized society is being tested today! I am going to ask you to lean into this process of imagining something new...

Let's attempt to enter into God's way of thinking, not our way, but God's way. How do we do that? We set our own egos aside and let our frustrations go. We open our hearts making room for a new creation that is born out of this chaos.

First let's look at what it means to be the beneficiary of God's generosity. What is happening behind the scenes when the last people who were chosen for work receive a whole day's wage despite their not working for a full day?

The parable doesn't say that the workers chosen last were lazy or didn't show up on time, or were the wrong color, or were the wrong gender. It only says they weren't chosen. Why they weren't chosen is not a concern to the landowner, there is absolutely no judgment placed on them, only that they needed work and wanted to be chosen along with the rest. And God, the landowner, goes out to invite them in! He lavishes them with the gift of a day's wages and asks nothing in return.

Denys Turner writes about Thomas Aquinas's theology of divine friendship this way, "Jesus proclaims that his disciples are to be called friends, this can only be because in some way the radical inequality of creator and creature has been overcome, because there is, as it were, a new creation, establishing a new order of relations between God and human beings. Since, however there is no possibility of that inequality being leveled by action on the part of the creature, it must be that the initiative has been taken on the part of God, entirely gratuitously to make human creatures thus equal to the divine, so that friendship becomes a possibility between them. He makes them friends! They are taken up in to the very life of God!

By doing this God is not only setting things aright, restoring the workers' dignity and worth, he is raising them up so that they can be in communion with all those who have always been the chosen ones. This is the kind of restorative justice that we are each called to be a part of.

On another level, this parable ignites our religious imagination by using the image of the vineyard. It is clear in today's passage that the Kingdom of Heaven is equated with this vineyard owner who lavishes his love on the first and the last. If we are to be a part of that Kingdom, to work for the Kingdom as Paul suggests, what might I do today, this week, to invite someone into this divine friendship who may otherwise have been chosen last?

