

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
September 18, 2011

In today's gospel we hear a parable about the workers in the vineyard, and if we are honest, the story shocks us, both those in the pew and those in the ambo. This parable bothers us because it reaches deep into our souls, into those places where we cry out: "It's just not fair!"

This parable takes us back to our childhood when our brothers and sisters seemed to get a bigger piece of cake, a nicer bike, or a better break than we did. This parable makes us itch because it reminds us of those times in our lives when we were left without a date, without being picked by the team, without being chosen by the teacher or the boss. Yes, there are so many times in our lives when it seems that "It's just not fair!"

That's why it's important for us to realize that Jesus first told this parable because people, especially good, religious people, were complaining to him that "It's just not fair!" The faithful were scandalized that Jesus was so open and accepting of the "no-accounts" of the day, like the tax collectors, the prostitutes and the newcomers to God's reign. The faithful thought that somehow religion was a matter of reward. But Jesus told them "no."

It was at a funeral in Skagit that I first heard of an interpretation of this parable that made sense to me. A parishioner converted to Catholicism on his deathbed. His son told me how his father was like those who were hired last in the parable. He talked about how some people, when they are going on a trip, buy their tickets far in advance, ensuring their reserved seat. Others rush into the train station or airport at the very last moment, buy their ticket and reach the same destination at the same time as those who planned ahead.

The other morning a woman on the street at the Wellness Center helped me understand this parable from a whole other angle. She was a single mother raising three children alone after her husband deserted them. She had little education and few marketable skills. Day after day she looked for a job at fast food restaurants, hoping against hope for a job. She remarked that she was not lazy. She would gladly work if anyone would hire her. But she was always left

behind because she was infirm and unskilled. Justice, she proposed, is about everybody being able to eat at the end of the day, no matter what each one's capacity to work. God's justice cannot be earned and does not depend on how much one works.

It is not a matter of reward but a matter of rejoicing in the fact that *all* are invited to the kingdom, the first as well as the last, the faithful as well as the "sinners," the old-timers as well as the newcomers. Jesus told the people of his day, those, like us, that our faith cannot be measured by our ways, but by God's ways because God is more generous, more loving, more forgiving than our minds could ever imagine.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." These words from the book of Isaiah remind us that we should not always judge God according to our own limited human standards and rules. The two great attributes of God in the Bible are justice and mercy. Today's responsorial psalm reminds us that "the Lord is just in all his ways." But we also hear that "the Lord is gracious and merciful." The God revealed in Jesus' life and teaching is both merciful and just. God gives to all of us what is due to us. But God is generous and compassionate to those who need it most.

We can continue to sing, "It's just not fair!" The gospel today encourages us to sing another tune.

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