

HOMILY 1 SUNDAY 25 – A\*

“Workers in the Vineyard”

(Isaiah 55:6-9; Psalm 145; Philippians 1:20-24, 27; Matthew 20:1-16)

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The Belly family was after their dad to move to the country and buy an acreage, which he finally did. But from the day they got there, every one of the family complained about everything. The last thing they complained about was that everyone else along the road had a sign for their acreage, and they didn't. So finally one day he put up a sign for their acreage that read, “Belly Acres”.

Does this gospel passage not bother you a little? Could you be trying to earn God's love too?

Work justly, but above all open to God's gratuitous grace.

As a teenager, I found myself working harder and harder to earn my dad's love and respect. Perhaps that was because he was rather demanding, critical and not good at just wasting time with his sons or at showing his children any affection. He was, after all, a much older self-taught farmer. When I realized that getting to the top of my class through much hard study didn't make any difference in our relationship, I gave up and started to rebel, with the result that I lost a scholarship and graduated a rather angry young man.

What I didn't realize is that I had also transferred that same attitude of trying to earn dad's love to God, and was also trying to earn God's love. Dad had a saying in French, “Il faut mérité le ciel” which means “One has to earn heaven.” That belief actually borders on heresy, but that is what we grew up with. It took many years of theology, spiritual direction and learning from life's experiences to let go of that way of thinking and acting, to where I could rest in the knowledge of God's love for me that is a freely given gift, unearned in any way. That is the point of this parable in the gospel of Matthew.

Matthew's perspective calls for Christians to understand their lives as being lived in the light of the present and coming Kingdom of God, in a loving, undeserved and unearned, graced relationship with God that is the most valuable of all realities calling for a response of gratitude and love in return. For Matthew, two kingdoms collide, and readers must decide with which one they are aligned.

The parable is upsetting for many because it represents a reversal of cultural values rather than their confirmation, a reversal of first and last, good and bad among Matthew's religious adherents. The parable deals with resentment toward others who have actually received the grace that one affirms in theory. Those who had worked all day begin not by objecting to the grace others had received, but by expecting that they themselves would receive more. When they receive the just fulfillment of their contract, they object not to what they have in fact received, but that others have been made “equal” to them. They have what they have by justice; others have been made equal by grace. Their objection

alienates them from the master.

This parable, while affirming the sovereign grace of God, rejects presuming on grace. At one level, this parable communicates that salvation is not any kind of achievement; that on human terms entering the kingdom is not merely hard but impossible. Grace is always amazing grace. Grace that can be calculated and expected is no longer grace. This story is a story of the triumph of grace.

An incident involving a ball game as a young priest in Beauval gave me an insight into the meaning of this gospel passage. I had been asked to play as part of a team for an evening ball game on the school diamond near the church. Just as the game was getting underway, I saw a car pull up to the rectory so I left the game, suggesting that they replace me as I did not know how long this would take. I spent the next hour helping a young married couple who were struggling in their relationship. Once in a while I would glance out the window at the ball game, feeling a little sorry for myself that I was missing all the fun. As soon as the couple left, I rushed out to see how my team was doing only to have them put me right back into the game. They had not replaced me. Rather, they played shorthanded for seven innings and now were just glad that I was back and they were a full team once again. I was touched that they had waited and only too glad to play the last couple innings.

Now I see that the Kingdom of God is like a ball game. Happy are those who come early and get to play the whole game. Those who come late, like I did, miss out on so much, yet better late than never. And everyone rejoices when someone does come into the kingdom, at whatever hour. This gospel that is hard for us to understand now makes more sense to me.

Marilyn Sweet, in her commentary in the *Living With Christ* for this Sunday, puts it so well. She writes, "Here we meet our God who is universally generous, who does not give us what we deserve, but rather what Love chooses to give. When we fall in love with this extraordinary God, we become partners in the building up of God's kingdom here on earth. And each week at Sunday Eucharist, we are renewed, fed with the body and blood of Christ, not because we worked for it and deserve it, but because God is more generous than we can ever imagine.

So remember, the Kingdom of God is like a ball game. We are all invited to be part of this kingdom, to enjoy it gracefully and gratefully. Yes, we are to live in a just manner as befits the kingdom, but above all to be open to amazing grace.