

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time: September 20, 2020

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

A Reflection on Matthew 20:1-16. The Workers in the Vineyard

This passage has much material for reflection, and each new examination brings some new nuance or insight. Several years ago, I wrote a paper on this story, reflecting on issues of justice and mercy. Another time, I focused on generosity. This time my reading was influenced by the pandemic in which we find ourselves and by the timing relative to my own personal life.

How old were you when you realized the world does not conform to your concept of fairness? And yet, we as adults, like the earliest-hired vineyard workers, continue to protest that the vineyard owner was unfair in giving the same wage to the latest-hired as to the earliest. We read and acknowledge the generosity of the owner, even as doubts hover in the backs of our minds.

As I read, reflected, and prayed about this passage this time, I saw that the landowner had addressed an issue not even stated in the story. We all know that day laborers earn very low wages today. It was probably true long ago as well. Those unhired laborers were there, were available, were willing to work, but no one had chosen them. They would go unpaid for the day—and consequently, perhaps unfed and/or unsheltered. In hiring them for even a short amount of time and paying them a full day's wages, the landowner gave them what they needed for their daily necessities and perhaps for those of their families as well. He gave not just what they expected, but what they needed.

Why did this passage speak to me so strongly this time? My son, who died 30 years ago today (Sept. 20), had a variety of jobs in the restaurant business during his high school years. He used to tell me about his distress at some of the stories he heard other workers tell. If their hours were cut or if they missed work because of illness, they wouldn't have enough money to buy food or pay their bills.

In this time of pandemic many people are facing loss of jobs and income and the constant threat of illness. In the beginning, when I ordered restaurant food for take-out, I thought that it was not necessary to tip 20% because I had no table service, but sometimes I might add 10% in "generosity." Then I remembered my son's stories, and thought to myself, "This is not right." Since then I have been tipping much more liberally, recognizing that, in a time of drastically reduced income, even that additional 10% may make a difference to someone. It is one small way of living the gospel.

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