

Our Envy . . . God's Grace.
A Sermon for The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (A)

Am I not allowed to do with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? Matthew 20:16

I'll ask the same question differently. Why ARE the laborers who worked all day upset that those who worked only one hour at day's end should be paid the same? What's the real reason?

For a long time, I thought (as maybe you did too) that they were simply (and rightly?) angry over the basic unfairness of the landowner's decision. I mean, really, wouldn't the strictly equitable thing have been to have paid those who came late and worked only a short while less than those who bore the heat of the long day? It wasn't that the landowner owed them more they had already agreed to the wage ahead of time. But surely eight hours' work and one hour's work cannot be considered of equal value!

That's what I've thought, at least, was the nature of their complaint. But now I think it's something more. Now, I think, it is, as the landowner himself hints at the end, all about envy. And its envy based not so much on an unfair wage but on an undeserving worker. It's about anger over someone taking your place when you believe that person has no right, or worth, to do so.

And perhaps 'worth' IS the key word here. It's one thing to resent someone appearing to cut in line ahead of us; that's bad enough. But when we think that person shouldn't even BE in the same line that we're in, that's intolerable. After all, we're the ones who have toiled and struggled and sacrificed in the vineyard all this time. We've done the heavy lifting; we've paid our dues. Why should these unfamiliar, untested latecomers get the jump on us? Why should they receive the same benefit and blessing? Why shouldn't they be given less? Or, for that matter, why should they be allowed to labor in the vineyard at all?

Exclusivity . . . pride of place . . . privilege. . . who's in and who's out. Such considerations, such judgments have marked our relationships as human beings from the start of time. They have tyrannized the Church and have deeply divided our country up to the present day. Be it questions over who is a true Christian or who is a real American, the answer has always been the same: it's those who hold and covet God's unique favor for themselves and themselves alone. It's those who think it's their personal property; and who because of race or culture or religion or heritage have lorded over others whom they have judged inferior. Added to these claims is the assertion that some have EARNED this unique favor while others have not. Some are deserving of more, and most are deserving of less.

This particular world view, as socially and politically entrenched as it is (as attractive as it is) happens NOT to be God's world view as Jesus makes abundantly clear in his

parable today. In God's eyes, all are equal, all born to love and serve the kingdom from different gifts and at different times.

So our personal worth is determined not by when we first labored in the Lord's vineyard, or for how long we have labored there, but by the sacred fact that we are God's children, made in God's image, and thus subject to the same grace God elects to bestow on all, in like measure. At seed time or harvest, whether we are young or old, in the first hour of faith and awareness or at the eleventh hour, just before closing time, it makes no difference we are God's own to bless and protect and delight in as God wills.

Dear friends, this is a message we'd do well to hear at any time and in any age. But it is one that's especially relevant now, I think, in this season of decision in this moment when we are apt to hear more loudly, more vehemently the voices of those resentful workers, and not the challenging, chastening voice of the landowner in the parable, the voice of God who is our loving Father. We simply can't afford to be tempted anew by all those old resentments, all that lingering privilege, by an ancient pride that would place us above a poor man's struggle or an immigrant's dream, or that would deem unworthy or insincere any turning of heart and mind toward the light of God's grace, no matter when or how that turning has occurred.

The plain truth is the decision is not ours to make. The judgment is not ours to impose. Our task, as Christians and now as citizens, is to harken again to those probing questions the landowner asks at the end of Jesus' parable, and to wonder again how closely, how dangerously they might be speaking of us; and then praise God for the grace always to answer with love. . . . 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +