

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN
THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY**

**SEPTEMBER 24, 2023
TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

SCRIPTURES:

Isaiah 55:6-9

Philippians 1:20-24, 27

Matthew 20:1-16

God is near and rich in forgiveness.

For me to live is Christ.

God is generous beyond measure.

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Matthew:

Only in Matthew is this parable of Jesus reported. Most likely, his Church community was experiencing a very particular need which this parable could address. It is interesting to speculate on what the situation was for which Matthew felt the need to include this teaching.

The parable operates on at least three levels: (1) Jesus wants to teach his disciples that sinners and tax collectors must not be excluded from God's blessings that he has come to bring. It may not seem fair to those who have worked so hard to observe all the minute details of the Law of Moses. These alienated people are only now being invited and are responding. They will share in the same promises and blessings as those who have been faithful all along. (2) When Matthew's community heard this parable, they spontaneously thought of the Gentiles who were now coming to faith in Jesus and to salvation originally promised through the Jews. The repeated messages of the prophets down through the centuries had not been addressed to them specifically. Now, the Gentiles are being given equal standing in the Church community and in the kingdom of God. (3) Now and for ages to come, all who are disciples of Jesus must not look upon the kingdom to which they have access as a matter of reward to be given to those who work hard. Everlasting life is God's pure gift, not earned, just given freely by God to whomever God wishes.

In the sophisticated and complex world in which we live, it is hard for us to conceive of a vineyard owner or manager coming out several times during the work day to hire new workers. But in the Middle Eastern world, grapes are still harvested in a very brief and intensive 'window of opportunity,' very late in the growing season, just before the rainy season begins in the fall. When the rain clouds begin to gather, the farm managers go for more help than they had originally thought necessary. If it rains tonight, all that is not yet harvested will be lost. Last-minute, short-term workers are urgently needed. The amount of work done is not the point; the need of the farmer is.

God seems to be fond of reversing the values that we consider to be so very important: a full wage for a full day's work. That is very crucial to our understanding of labor-management relations. Even children feel they should be paid an allowance based on how much work they do in the family. Jesus, however, proclaims that the first shall be last and the last first. That is patently unfair! But, we are not at all dealing here with pay for work done. We are hearing about God's absolutely spontaneous and free gift of love, for everyone! There is no earning and rewarding here at all.

Isaiah:

A disciple of the great Isaiah of Jerusalem had accompanied his people into exile in Babylon and was writing a worthy supplement to the original Book of Isaiah (Chapters 1-39). This portion of the Book (Chapters 40-55) we attribute to the Second-Isaiah. It is a book of consolation and of hope. As the Exile is about to come to an end, the message is one of promise for the return and restoration of Israel. At the beginning of the Exile, God is present to his people as a chastisement for their sins of infidelity to the Covenant; now, at the end, God is present to them as hope and salvation. God is even at work on their behalf in allowing another pagan leader, Cyrus of Persia, to become their *messiah*, so to speak, when he decrees that they should return to Jerusalem. How strange are the ways of God!

Philippians:

Paul sent at least three pieces of correspondence to the community he had established at Philippi, his first base of operations on the European continent. These three letters have been reedited and merged into one: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians. The beginning of the Letter, as we know it today, is really from the second piece of correspondence (1:1-3:1a). Epaphroditus had brought Paul a gift of money from the community at Philippi, and Paul had written to them (4:10-20). This same Epaphroditus has been very sick, is now recovering, and will return to Philippi, bringing this correspondence from Paul. In it, Paul sends a message of encouragement to this community.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Make a list of all the things you find “unfair” in the Church. What practices do you find unfair in your parish? What are the reasons or explanations given for the things you think unfair? Do you understand the explanations given? Who is responsible for this unfairness? Can you do anything about it?
2. Have you ever been the victim of unfair practices where you work or where you spend leisure time? Were there serious instances of unfair practices in your family of origin? Have you ever perpetrated unfairness upon other people? Why? Is there anything unfair in the practices of your city or state government? What about the federal government?
3. Make a list of all the times and instances when God has been overwhelmingly generous to you, going far beyond fairness. Count the times. Why does God transcend fairness in dealing with us? What explanation does God give for going beyond fairness? What does this say to us as disciples of Christ?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Select one person toward whom you will go beyond fairness in your dealings this week. Decide how you will be generous.

PRAYER

**Father,
guide us as you guide creation
according to your law of love.
May we love one another
and come to perfection
in the eternal life prepared for us.**

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

“Life is not fair! Some have so much without having had to do anything to deserve it. Others have so little, when they have been virtuous all their lives and have almost nothing to show for it!” We often hear this or similar comments on the inequalities of this world. Even in the Church, there are inequalities. Or, at least, some seem to have more privileges than others.

One of the most common complaints that parish priests have to deal with concerns the alleged unfairness handed out by laypersons in Church ministries. At one time, I suppose, people had similar complaints about favoritism practiced by the clergy, but they had no one to complain to! Now, they come to the pastor with stories of discrimination against their children at the hands of catechists, confirmation leaders, or first sacraments’ personnel.

“My daughter never missed even one class. She did all of her service projects. But you have allowed so-and-so to be confirmed when he hardly ever came and surely did not finish his service hours! It is unfair.” I have had a parish director of confirmation quit her position because I wanted her to modify the requirements for a poor soul who had a learning disability and could not do all the lessons. “It isn’t fair, when all the others have worked so hard!” The last straw was when I quoted the Parable of the late workers from Matthew!

We have made many rules in the Church, all in the interest of making it fair for everyone. But then, someone comes along who does not fit our categories, and we go berserk. We are confused; we do not know what to do.

An altar server always shows up late. We do not know that she/he is part of a large family, with only one bathroom, where everyone has to be brought to Mass, as soon as all are ready. Every family is not organized nor disciplined like the members of a monastery community.

A special minister of the Eucharist wears the very best she can afford; some of us complain that it not appropriate to be “on the altar dressed like that!”

To paraphrase the late “Tip” O’Neil, all Church life is at the parish level. The policies and practices of the local parish are those of the whole Church as far as the parishioners are concerned. Surely, God must be concerned.

© 2017 Rev. Clement D. Thibodeau. All rights reserved.