

Sunday, Sept. 24, 2014

25th Sunday of the Year (A)

Conventual Mass

“Your Ways Are Not My Ways”

Sr. Catherine, a Daughter of Charity, who taught at Seton High School for many years is now working among the Native Americans in the West. As we spoke together about her experiences on one of her visits here she mentioned how sensitive and respectful of their ways she had to be especially in matters touching religion. She noted, however, that for the particular people she served God is not seen as a God of love and mercy. She went on to say that when she prayed with an individual in their tiny hospital and mentioned God’s love tears often flowed down that person’s cheeks. I don’t think we fully appreciate the effect of Jesus’ teaching on the love of God on his hearers or of his disciples on their contemporaries either.

And I daresay we have so often heard the words and the parables that they have been worn smooth in our own consciousness. We need to recover for ourselves the startling news of what Jesus reveals to each one of us. That teaching was enfleshed in Jesus and was finalized by his death on the cross, It is interesting to note that St. Matthew placed the third prediction of the passion right after the parable of the laborers in the vineyard: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Jesus’ teaching, his parables, his wonders, his very life among us are all revelation of the Father’s great love in its various manifestations. We need only think of the parables of the Prodigal Son, of the Good Samaritan of the Good Shepherd as well as Jesus’ encounters with sinners and tax collectors, of the woman caught in adultery for example. Even the parable of the sower is an encouragement to let the good news

of the kingdom fall on the fertile fields of our hearts. The themes are basically the same even though the emphasis may be different.

Last Sunday's gospel underscored the forgiveness that an all merciful God extends to each one of us no matter what we have done. It showed us that we must be God's coworkers in bringing that love and forgiveness to others.

Today's parable is not about economics or inequality. It is about the kingdom, that is about God, whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways. It's about each person's relationship to God, or perhaps better put God's relationship to us.ⁱ We are pulled back, of course, by what strikes us at first as an inequality. After all, those who went out to work in the vineyard at dawn bore the heat and burden of the day whereas those who came last had a much easier time of it.

By giving the laborers the salary agreed upon, the master in no way wrongs the workers who began at dawn. They themselves do not disagree with this. But they grumble because those who came last received as much as they. And this is what the master reproaches them with, reminding them that they received their just due. They are envious because the master is generous.

Actually those early workers who had been standing around idle were hired because of the goodness and kindness of the master who offered them a silver coin for their salary. Therefore, they should not only be grateful to him, but also rejoice that others were called later and now receive the same pay. We find a parallel in the parable of the prodigal son and his older brother. In both cases, Jesus condemns the attitude of those who do not accept God's goodness. There is no place in the kingdom for a bid for more pay since all we have comes from God as gift and not from our own merits.ⁱⁱ This

includes our very lives which is a call to share in the life of God himself for all eternity. God himself is the silver coin. He can give no more. "Everything I have is yours," says God to the prodigal's brother and to us (Lue 15:21). Those who have served God from infancy as well as those who turn to him on their deathbeds, the Jew who has followed the way of his ancestors for millennia and the gentile grafted onto that tree, all receive the same wage.

In the chapter preceding this parable we find the exchange between Jesus and the rich "young man." He left nothing to follow the lure of his possessions rather than to follow Jesus. But Peter and the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus. Peter tells Jesus: "We have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us" ((Mathew 19:27)? In other words, "What is the payoff, what's in there for me?" All of us are called in one capacity or another to work in the Lord's vineyard, to help usher in the kingdom. But this egocentric attitude which is the same attitude of the dawn laborers shows that Peter is not yet ready to do God's work. He must and we must go out of ourselves leaving our egocentricity behind so that we can adopt the attitude of service to God and one another. Jesus answered Peter's worry with a vision of unearned abundance, that is, the silver coin symbolic of that gift of God himself.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although this is primarily a parable of God's generosity, love and mercy, it also includes us. Each of us in his or her own capacity is called to labor in God's vineyard. Some, like a Mother Teresa of Calcutta or a Dorothy Day have been called to a special work. All of us are called to show God's love, generosity and mercy in the ordinary events of daily life to those immediately around us, to strangers who cross our path, to remember that we and all we meet are called to receive the same silver coin.

i" Jon Sjea. The Spiritual Wisdom, pf the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year A (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 2004) 279

ii" Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.4, Ordinary Time, Year A (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1992) 197-9

iii" John Shea, 279