

Homily based on the readings from September 24, 2023 (Isaiah 55.6-9; Philippians 1.20c-24, 27a; Matthew 20.1-16a)

One of the best ways to learn about *ourselves* is to listen carefully to one of Jesus' parables – paying particular attention to which of the characters we relate to the most. For the Parable of the Prodigal Son, do we identify with the younger son, with the older son, or with the father? For the Parable of the Good Samaritan, do we identify with the Samaritan, with the wounded man travelling to Jericho, with the priest or the Levite, with the innkeeper, or – heaven forbid – with the robbers along the road?

Today's Gospel offers a similar opportunity for self-reflection. Since we are all here at Mass – and probably show up every week – I expect most of us identify with the laborers who began working at dawn – or perhaps with the workers who were hired mid-morning. For the most part, we are accustomed to doing what is right – to keeping to the straight and narrow. Many of us have gotten married and raised children, had meaningful careers, volunteered within our parish and our community.

Most of us, in our own way, have been working in Christ's vineyard for as long as we can remember.

Without pointing fingers or naming names, I suspect we all know dozens of people – colleagues, neighbors, family members – who have spent their entire lives ignoring Christ. At a basic level, we hope they will amend their ways – and would do anything we can to support them in doing so. Nevertheless, there is probably some tiny part of us that believes that we are better Christians *now* than they will *ever* be – that we somehow deserve a richer reward. We definitely want them to be saved, but perhaps saved just a *little* bit less than we are.

I had an interesting conversation a few years ago with several of my students at Connecticut College. We were discussing some of the local educational programs that allow people who are currently in prison to earn college degrees. My students were incredibly enthusiastic about these opportunities – until they realized that the prisoners would be obtaining degrees that were virtually identical to their own. They

wanted the prisoners to get an education, but one that was slightly less prestigious than what they were getting themselves. This perspective had nothing to do with what the prisoners actually needed or deserved, but rather with what the students themselves felt entitled to *receive*.

One of the main functions of Christ's parables is to call attention to the flaws that afflict all human beings – not just so we can understand them, but so we can work to correct them. Once we recognize ourselves in the parables, we can see more clearly what attitudes and behaviors we need to avoid. Regarding the workers in the vineyard, there are a few points we need to remember. First of all, as the Gospel makes clear, the wage given to the latecomers in no way diminishes the payment received by any of the other workers:

My friend, I am not cheating you.

Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?

In the same way, a college degree received by a convicted felon has no bearing on anyone else's credentials. What Christ wants us to

understand is that somebody else getting into heaven does not diminish heaven for the rest of us – in fact, it has exactly the opposite effect.

Another point we would do well to consider, even though it is not explicitly mentioned in this parable, is that all of us are completely and totally unqualified to work in the vineyard. If we were hired at 6:00, we should count ourselves lucky not to have been fired at 6:15. Remember the words of Saint Paul:

Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God.

I have heard this passage summarized as follows: *God does not choose the qualified, but he qualifies the chosen.* Whatever successes we may

have experienced are not due to our own qualities, but are entirely the result of God working through us. God acts according to his own schedule, through whatever means or instruments he chooses to employ. If we complain about the amount of time someone else spends working, we are really just turning the conversation away from God and fixating on ourselves.

Self-reflection is useful, but only if it leads to self-improvement. Every time we hear one of Christ's parables, we have the opportunity to take an unflinching look at ourselves from God's perspective. We must never allow ourselves to become complacent about our faults and shortcomings – just because they are shared by so many others. We must work every day to grow into the people God wants us to become: faithful laborers in his vineyard, humble instruments of his will, and radiant beacons of his utterly unearned generosity.