

## Homily

25th Sunday in OT A 9.24.17

Father Todd Molinari

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The liturgy for this Sunday introduces a shift in our reflections, both regarding the Gospel of Matthew and the First Reading. Up until now Matthew has presented to us the teachings of Jesus on how to live out our discipleship within the Church community that he institutes and calls into being. The first reading echoes that theme from the faith of Ancient Israel, proclaiming the practical need to attend to the need to be faithful and to return to the Lord when we fail, but to likewise call one another to accountability to the same.

This Sunday the Gospel of Matthew continues with teachings on discipleship, but now broadens and deepens those teachings to point to the ultimate purpose of being a disciple in the Church: The Kingdom of God. And this broadening is taught by Jesus in the form of parables. It would be best to think of the Kingdom of God as a “both/and” with regard to the Church: It is both the goal and final destiny for the Church - the Church will at the end of time yield to the fullness of the Kingdom and it exists for that reason alone. And, the Church is the “locus” or “place” in which the Kingdom is already realized and made present in and through its discovery in you and me: The Kingdom “arrives” or “comes” whenever and however we respond to the parables of Jesus with faith. As Jesus says, “The kingdom is within you.”

Usually the parables of Jesus are interpreted allegorically, that is, that they are viewed as pithy stories that show how the faith of Israel (the Jews) is fulfilled with the coming of Jesus and the advent of Christianity. In this view, an unfortunate anti-judaism that posits that Christianity supersedes Judaism is emphasized, as well as an overly-simplistic point that everyone already knows. We don’t need Jesus to tell us that God wants to redeem all humanity. We already know that. Questions of “who” gets into the kingdom or “when” someone gets into the Kingdom are irrelevant, or worse.

If that’s not what the parables are for, and if Jesus doesn’t want us to interpret them in an anti-Jewish way, then how are we to understand them? The simple answer is to take the parables at face-value. Jesus seems to follow the saying “life is often stranger than fiction”. The challenge and the edginess to the parables is found in their ordinariness: how they speak to our day-to-day lives and what values and desires often drive us and need to be called out if we are to find the kingdom within you.

Today’s parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard does just that: Jesus tells us the short story of the Kingdom where a landowner goes out at different times of the day to hire workers to harvest his vineyard. At the end of the day when it’s time to give

everyone their daily wage, he pays the workers who worked only an hour the same amount the workers who worked all day agreed to receive. When they complain, the master responds, “What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? Or am I not free to do as I wish with my money? Are you envious because I am generous?”

We can understand that this parable of the kingdom is about the generosity of God. God chooses and God gives generously as he pleases for those in the kingdom. But we know that. If we ask ourselves where is the challenge? Where is the edge? We have to look a little deeper. Notice that this landowner acts in an increasingly strange way: The first group he hires follows the usual expectations: They work and he agrees to pay them a set amount. But from there things get peculiar: He goes out and hires a second group later in the morning, but there’s no agreement for wages or set hours of work. Likewise the other groups of workers he hires; then we discover that he hires the last group when there’s only one hour of work left! You can imagine the scene where the one group just hired is going out to the fields with their tools while the other workers are wrapping up. The landowner doesn’t seem to know how many workers he really needs and/or he’s the most disorganized landowner in history. Then to top it all off, he ends up paying the last hired what he agreed to pay the first group of laborers - even though the first group was the only one that he signed a contract with! You can see why the other workers were not only confused but upset.

This parable is a kind of absurdist comedy of errors, yet Jesus uses it to illustrate something important about finding and living the kingdom: It’s really a call to ethical justice to all people - that we are indeed our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. That what happens to one person or group is linked to everyone else, whether you realize it or not. It’s also about just wages too: If the wealthy treated the laborer the way the landowner treats his workers in today’s parable, how different would the world be? Jesus asks.

Jesus is actually giving a commentary on some ancient Scriptures from 1 Samuel 30:21-25. If the landowner pays everyone a living wage, and if the workers can be content with what is right rather than what they perceive to be fair, then we can begin to see Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom. But Jesus wants us to apply this to our life and do so in a social and communal way: When we look at our world, where are we challenged to be at peace with what is right rather than what we perceive to be fair for our own desires? Think of the immigration issue or the health care reform issue, or the scourge of racism? If we want a society where everyone is treated rightly rather than my sense of fairness being absolutized as the center of the universe, how might I see things and people differently?

As we approach the altar to receive our Lord in the Eucharist, let us be open to the challenge of today’s parable.