

Homily for September 18, 2011

When I was fourteen, working in the family grocery store, I learned many things, and much of what I learned was not about stocking and selling groceries. One day a very tall man brought his groceries to the counter where I was the checker. This, of course, was before the days of digital weighing and checking. When I weighed the cabbage and he saw the amount I charged him, he said, "You have charged me a penny too much." I looked again and said, "No, that is correct according to the scale." The man turned, left his groceries on the counter, and walked out of the store. I was puzzled and indignant. I walked to the next counter where a very kind older lady was the checker. When I finished telling her what had happened, she said, "Son, from his height the amount would look different, so he did think you were over-charging him."

The way we see many things in life depends on context and perspective. Today's Gospel is one of those. Consistently when my students at Iowa State read this passage from today's gospel, they responded exactly the way those men hired at dawn responded: "That's not fair. The ones who worked only an hour were paid as much as the ones who worked all day?" Their response is understandable: from their perspective and context a person who has worked hard from dawn till sunset in the heat of the day is watching someone who worked only an hour in the cooler part of the day receive the same they receive.

But my students were thinking about the story as an event like a story in a newspaper. They were forgetting that the story is a parable, a story told to illustrate a point, and that it has a context. In the gospel today Jesus tells his disciples a story to teach a truth. He introduces his parable with these words that give the context: "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard." This is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, not about workers, working hours, working conditions, or just wages. It is about the end of time and the coming of God's kingdom. And from this Sunday until Advent our readings from the gospel will remind us to be prepared for the coming of Jesus.

Now let's look again at the Gospel. What is its social context and from what perspective do we hear the gospel? What truth is it teaching? The people Jesus is

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speaking to are the Jews, who have been called to work in the master's vineyard— we may say—from the dawn of salvation. Through the hours and even until the evening of his coming, he continues to call people to work in his vineyard. If we respond in the way that the first workers responded, we are saying that we have worked so faithfully for God that we have earned a place in his kingdom. We worked for it and we deserve it. Jesus is telling us that our merciful God gives salvation to all those who respond to his call, not just to those who responded first.

As we listen to this parable, we must remember its context and the perspective Jesus gives us. St. Paul warns us, as he warned the people in the church at Corinth, against being presumptuous in the face of God. To them he says, “Therefore whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall” (I Corinthians 10:12). When we examine ourselves, do we not recognize that every one of us is a sinner? Can any one of us say, “I deserve heaven, I earned it”? Again St. Paul reminds us, as he reminded those in the church in Rome: “. . . the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Does any one of us want what we have earned? I know I certainly do not. In the evening when our Lord Jesus comes, I trust in his generous mercy.