

CONVERSION
25th Sunday in OT, September 20, 2020
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Most of Jesus' parables can be understood many different ways and the parable from our Gospel today does not disappoint.

St. Matthew gives us this beautiful story filled with vivid detail that we can easily imagine. Jesus is continuing to head to Jerusalem walking along the eastern side of the Jordan River where he will soon cross near Jericho to begin the uphill climb to the Holy City. As they trudge along, Jesus shares the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.

The landowner contracts with workers for the usual daily wage which was single Roman silver coin called a "denarius." Wages were paid daily as required in Deuteronomy and a workday was from sun up to sun down. The hiring continues throughout the day about every three hours... nine o'clock, noon and again at three o'clock.

Surprisingly, new hires are even sought at five o'clock, only an hour before the customary quitting time.

With the day ended, the foreman begins to pay out the wages starting with the last hired. I suspect these men were in a line and they see the workers hired at 5 PM receive a full denarius after only working an hour. I think most us, if we were hired at 9 AM and worked the whole day throughout the heat, would surely expected two coins, maybe even three. But as the foreman approaches, the men who had labored nine hours received the same as those working only an hour. They grumble... “This is not fair.” I think all of us can relate.

The owner tells them, “I did not cheat you. Did I not pay the wage we agreed upon?” So, it’s not a matter of justice... that the owner fulfilled his contract. Rather, the hires take issue – or begrudge -- the owner being generous with his own money, spending it the way he chooses.

So, we can look as Jesus’ parable from the perspective of envy. And Jesus specifically meant envy not jealousy... jealousy is when you worry that someone will take what you have ... envy is wanting what someone else has. We can look at the parable from the perspective of

the final judgement when the last will be first. Our perhaps Jesus' story illustrates the history of salvation where the Gentiles depicted as the workers hired last, are placed on an equal footing with the Jewish people. And, lastly, we can look at the parable through the lens of conversion and that's where I'd like us to focus today.

As many of you know, I was raised as a Baptist and, in that faith practice, coming to Jesus is very different than our Catholic faith. My Baptist church was a small, rural one along a gravel road. Services were a good two hours... something not always welcomed by a teen like me who'd rather sleep until noon. At the end of the pastor's sermon, there would be an altar call. The pastor would come down from the pulpit and passionately invite anyone feeling the presence of Jesus to come forward and to make a public declaration of their belief and acceptance of all that is Jesus Christ. Normally, no one came forward but, boy, when someone did, it was a big deal. It took courage to stand up in front of your family, friends and neighbors and say, "I believe in Jesus!" Sometimes the new comer was very old, sometimes very young and

there was everything in between... I made my own declaration at 14. In that moment, someone's age didn't matter, status didn't matter, past transgressions didn't matter... what matter was that someone who was idle heard the call of the foreman and had been hired to work in the owner's vineyard.

As I studied Catholicism towards my conversation to the Church, I found this lack of an altar call or public declaration troubling – at first. In the Catholic faith, it seemed that one is baptized as an infant and a person's walk with Christ is somehow just inherited whether one wants a relationship or not. But... as I delved deeper into the practice of our faith, I found public declarations everywhere... reconciliation, the rosary, in our reciting of our Profession of Faith, attending Mass, anointing of the sick, being an altar server, musician or an usher... and most importantly, in the Eucharist. In each of these, we publicly step forward and say, "I believe!" And, in experiencing the sacraments, we ask for, expect, a conversion of soul, a refreshed walk with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is what Jesus is illustrating in our parable today. Perhaps you can be seen as the laborer hired first thing in the morning? Perhaps I am the laborer hired at noon, and still yet, there is an elderly person upon their deathbed who is the worker hired at 5 PM. To Jesus, it doesn't matter *when* the person comes, it matters that the person comes. Regardless the time of day, Jesus invites us to celebrate each soul that arrives to help us work his vineyard— and all of us shares equally in the abundant generosity of God.

It's never too late become a Christian and lay hold of our Lord's salvation. It's never too late to experience a renewed conversion. If you have a spouse, family member, maybe a child or friend who has left the practice of our faith, we are tasked by Jesus to be the foreman, to have our arms and hearts open, to welcome back those who wish to work in his fields. We should not look for workers only once, but throughout the day, every day. Likewise, we should not take our faith for granted or stand idle.

In the Sixth Century, St. Gregory the Great put it this way, “Since one person is brought to a good life in childhood, another in youth, another in young adulthood, another in old age, another at the age of infirmity, it is as if workmen are being called to the vineyard at different hours. Look at your conduct, my friends, and see if you are *still* God’s workmen. Let everyone reflect on what he is doing and consider whether he is laboring the Lord’s vineyard.”