

## HOMILY - TWENTY-FIFTH SUN. IN ORD. [A]

[*Me and You*]

One of the little dramas that would play out at my house when I was growing up involved sharing a piece of cake, pie – anything that more than one of us wanted to eat. This would involve one of us kids cutting or sharing out the item and the other watching very carefully to see that not one micro inch was taken beyond the “fair share.” Later, this ritual even evolved to a rule that one person would cut and then the other could choose which piece they wanted.

This idea of being completely fair is one we humans usually favor. Yet, in the first reading the prophet Isaiah writes of God: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.* We are a society, in this country, of rights. We have been brought up with ideas of fairness and equality. A parable like the one Jesus tells in today’s Gospel strikes many people as unfair and a violation of a person’s rights. But that would be viewing this story through the lens of the world – not through the lens of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let’s look first at the common reaction to this story. A day laborer, both 2,000 years ago and today, is someone who seeks work each day to get enough money to get through the next day. They are usually hired by different bosses and are paid out at the end of the work day. In the Gospel, those who had worked all day in the hot sun were paid the same amount as the person who had only been hired at 5 pm and had worked a couple hours.

It is a natural human tendency to compare ourselves to other people. Are they prettier? Are they smarter? Do they have an easy job and make more money? But think of what is going on when we do this and dwell on what others have or who they are. It almost always leads to hard feelings, bitterness and envy. We don’t really know what that other person’s life story is, but they have something we would like to have, and we can end up dismissing them or even cutting them down in our minds.

Whenever we compare ourselves to someone else, whenever we see it as “Me versus You,” we make a mistake. What mistake? The mistake is that there can never be an accurate comparison between two human beings, because each human being is *unique* in the whole world. God does not create an exact replica of any human. Which simply means that each one of us is “necessary.” If we harbor negative or bitter thoughts about someone else, we end up diminishing ourselves. Almost 400 years ago an English poet and Anglican priest named John Donne wrote: *No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . . any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

The day laborers who had worked all day were entitled to a full day's wages – which was exactly what they got. Their problem wasn't that the landowner cheated them – it is that he was very generous to the two-hour workers. This gets to the heart of the problem with those who think this story is unfair. The story is also about people being unhappy over someone else's good fortune. Instead of that negative view, there is a positive way to see this. What if the all-day laborers, who were paid their own full day's wage, had instead *congratulated* the short time workers for their good fortune, and then turned and *thanked* the landowner for such generosity? Sound like a fairy tale?

Why is it often so hard to build up others? Why do the words, “good for you,” sometimes stick in our throats? It is because we all have some insecurity that we might end up with the short end of the stick – that if we don't keep competing for every last penny, somehow we may end up poor, weak and alone. Yet, if we are followers of Jesus, it *never* needs to be that way!

None of us is *the* best at what we do, but each one of us can seek to *do* our best as human beings. This moves the focus from worrying over what others have or do, to what *we* have or can do. What if we asked God for the grace to live a life of optimism, generosity and kindness? If we received that grace, our worldview would go from “Me versus You,” to “Me AND You.”

There are at least two methods to use to overcome fretting about what others have or who they are. One is to learn to truly appreciate what we have been given. Are we in fairly good health, able to get around, able to take care of ourselves and experience the beauty of life? Those are all gifts that most of us can appreciate. If we are looking for the huge reward or the big payoff – for the ease of a life of comfort, we are looking through a telescope from the wrong end. Turn it around and focus on what we have!

The second method is to seek to understand another person – not to judge them. There is so much we will never know about another human being – how they arrived at this point in their journey – what scary or terrible things they have gone through. To the outside world, they may look like they have it all and the sky's the limit. Yet, for all we know, they have family problems and other issues in their lives. Would any of us really want to trade our lives with anyone else?

Remember how Jesus began this parable? He said: *The kingdom of heaven is like*. The landowner is a symbol of God and of how much God loves each one of us. It matters not to God when we turn to God and seek to bring about God's reign in this world – his pay is always the same for each person. What are the wages of God? They are love, support, and being provided for in this world.

At the same time, it's obvious that God goes *far beyond* fairness in God's approach to salvation. After all, starting with Adam and Eve, down to our time, God has consistently forgiven all who repent and turn to him. Entering heaven is never a matter of who deserves it most – it's not a matter of comparing people. Can you see where we would be if that was God's standard? Jesus would never have granted paradise to the Good Thief.

Jesus ended the parable by reminding us that the last will be first and the first last. This is how we come closer to the Lord: not by comparing, but by caring – not by “Me vs. You,” but by “Me AND You.”

*Let us pray for the grace to be kind, generous and grateful – it will make our lives so much easier.*