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Are we jealous because God is generous?

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 22, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

I have an idea that almost every one of us who hears this Gospel, and we've heard it before, feels more in touch with the workers who worked that whole day and then watched as others who worked only an hour received the same thing they did.

We feel with them when we feel they should have a right to grumble.
This is not fair.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 55:6-9

Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18

Philippians 1:20-24, 27

Matthew 20:1-16

Full text of the readings [1]

I think that for most of us, our first reaction to this parable, would be like those workers. It just doesn't seem fair, and yet, if we try to probe more deeply and really hear what Jesus is saying, this is a story that helps us to understand the Kingdom of Heaven, or as we use more often, the Reign of God.

The Kingdom of Heaven makes us think of a place, but that's not what Jesus is talking about. He's talking about the Reign of God, and this story helps us to understand the Reign of God.

What we mean by that is the dynamic rule of God's saving love, where all of us and all of creation are bound together under this dynamism of God's love being poured forth upon all of us.

That's the Reign of God. The realm of human persons embracing God's saving love, made present for us in Jesus.

The result would be, if we really entered into this Reign of God, understood it and lived according to it, every person would have a full human life.

There would be peace on earth. Everyone would live in joy in the Reign of God. It's important for us to understand it. Remember, early in this Church year as we began to read the Gospel of Matthew and follow Jesus and His disciples on His way to Jerusalem where He kept on teaching them along the way, at the beginning of this teaching, He called the first disciples and said to them, "The Reign of God is at hand." It's ready to break forth. Change your lives.

We have to change our lives, our thinking and the way we act if we're going to enter into the Reign of God, if we're going to help to transform our world into as close an image of that Reign of God as possible.

That's why it means radical change, turning ourselves inside out, our thinking, our attitudes. The reason why it's so important that we do this radical change is in our first lesson today.

Seek God while God may be found. Call to God while God is near. Let the wicked abandon their ways, let them forsake their thoughts, let them turn to God for God will have mercy, for our God is generous and forgiving.

This reminds us almost of those words of the landowner. Are you jealous because I'm generous? Our God is generous and forgiving.

Isaiah, speaking for God, goes on to say, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways," says God. "For as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts."

What God is saying to us through these words proclaimed by Isaiah, is how different God is. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God's ways are not our ways.

We have to change radically in our thinking, our understanding, our actions, if we're going to enter into the Reign of God. Again, this is why it's so important to hear what Jesus is trying to tell us about the Reign of God in this parable.

There are many interpretations, or could be interpretations of it, and I'm going to suggest a couple for us today. Probably the first thing would be to put ourselves back in the context of the community of disciples that this passage was written for back when it was written down, 30 or 40 years after Jesus had died and risen from the dead, and gone from the presence of the disciples in the way He had been with them before.

At this time, Matthew's community was a community of Jewish Christians. These are Christians who were still living according to the Jewish law. Jesus didn't really come to establish a new church. Jesus came to reform Judaism.

So the first thing is the disciples were still following the prayers, going to the Temple for prayers at different times of the day, gathering together to commemorate what Jesus did at the Last Supper in the breaking of the bread, and then reaching out to try to bring healing and love to the suffering, sick and so on.

The first disciples were still living according to the Jewish way, but now, at the time that Matthew's Gospel was written, they're being outnumbered and kind of overwhelmed by the fact that Paul and others have gone out and now Gentiles, non-Jews are coming in to the church.

They're not going through the rites of circumcision. They're not following the whole Jewish Torah, and so the Jewish Christians are a bit upset and thinking, "These people are coming in, in a sense, at the last minute and they're receiving everything that was promised to us way back when God first made the covenant with Moses, saying, 'I will be your God and you will be My people,' and they received the Torah and followed it all these centuries. Now these people are coming in and not following it."

So Matthew really tells this parable for those Jewish Christians to help them understand what Jesus has said, "I came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it," in a sense, to move beyond it.

So now these are people who are entering into the community of disciples and not going through the Jewish ritual of circumcision and following the Jewish law. It probably was intended to help those Jewish Christians to be more accepting and to bring more unity within the community. It was in danger of being torn apart over this issue.

So Matthew's parable helps them understand this, but there is more to it if we look more deeply.

One commentator that I read with a reflection on this Gospel told about a woman who belonged to a Bible study group that the commentator was part of also.

This woman was a single mother with three children. Her husband had deserted her and the family and she had kind of a different take on this parable because she came at it from a different perspective, a person who had no job and who was struggling to survive and take care of three children.

In her reflection on this parable she said, "I can understand what is happening here because those people who are idle, it's not because they want to be idle. No one had offered them a job."

She said, "Many times, I've stood in line waiting for employment, but I don't get chosen. My skills aren't marketable. Others are stronger, more robust, so I know what it means to be passed by."

She said, "If the owner had given those workers at the last hour only a twelfth of what the others had gotten, what difference would that make? It really wouldn't help them. Yes, the others had worked through the heat of the day, but they had the confidence and satisfaction of knowing at the end of the day that they would have food for their children."

She didn't think of this as unfair at all. She really understood what Jesus was saying.

She understood it because she also had a sense of God in a way that the others, or even the rest of us, didn't have. She understood God as being the God who is all generous.

What the land owner says at the end is in a sense representing God in the parable. The land owner really is God. "Are you jealous because I'm good?" She had a much deeper understanding that everything we have comes to us from God.

Everything is gift.

Even though we worked, we've been blessed because God has made that possible for us. We would have no talents to work if they hadn't been given to us. She understands, and we all need to understand this. We are all receiving from God at every moment.

It's really short-sighted for us to think, "I earned it. I deserve more than the others."

No, all of us are helpless and without anything without God.

That's what that woman understood and that's what we have to understand, too, if we are really going to now live according to the way of Jesus and the way of the Gospel, and help to transform our world into as close an image of the Reign of God as possible.

That's what we're called to do.

If we listen to this parable, we'll understand better, I think first of all, how far we are from the Reign of God in our attitudes and in what is happening in our world.

Just this last week, Republican candidates for the presidency had one of their debates. You may have heard it. At one point, the moderator asked one of the candidates, "What would you do if a 30-year-old man who chose not to purchase health insurance suddenly found himself in need of six months of intensive care? What should we do?"

The candidate said, "That's what freedom is all about, taking your own risks," implying that's his own choice. Too bad.

The moderator pushed him a little bit more. "Should society just let this person die?"

Do you know what happened?

Maybe you heard it. The crowd erupted with cheers and shouts, "Yes! Yes!"

What is happening if we have candidates who would agree with that yes in public, with our fellow citizens who would say, "Yes, let that person die"?

Where is the compassion, the generosity of God as is proclaimed in this Gospel. "Are you jealous because I am generous?"

Where do we find, in our society today, that spirit of total generosity, unconditional, unlimited love that God demonstrates to us? This parable shows how God really is, and what the Reign of God should be like, where all of us have this attitude, this spirit, which was in Christ Jesus, who though He was God did not think that He should cling to His divinity, but emptied Himself and poured forth His love upon us, upon our world, our universe.

Isn't it true that we need to change dramatically if we're going to be like God shown to us in the parable by Jesus, a God who never limits the love that God pours forth upon us?

I hope that with these reflections, we can understand more deeply what this parable really is saying to us about what we have received from God, and are always receiving from God, and how we must try to reflect that generous, unlimited, unconditional love of God, insofar as we can.

For most of us, it will require radical change. Change your lives.

So, perhaps as we conclude our reflection and we prepare to go back out into our world, we must keep reflecting on these Scriptures, and try to heed very carefully the last sentence of our second lesson today, where Paul was writing to those Christians at Philippi.

His last sentence, his plea said, "Try then to adjust your lives according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

This is what we must try to do now, adjust our lives, our thinking, our attitude to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaimed in our midst today.

[Homily given at Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in the Detroit archdiocese]

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