NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

What the parable of the vineyard workers really says

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Sep. 20, 2012 NCR Today

A few summers ago, I had taken to driving to St. John's Health Center in Santa Monica, Calif., for Sunday vigil Mass. Most Sunday liturgies in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles are so well-attended and run at an hour or more, and I have MS and heat can provoke symptoms. St. John's was the only chapel or church within miles that had air conditioning. The priest who celebrated Mass most of the time was from Africa. He was a gentle soul, kept his homilies under 10 minutes, and was well-regarded by the regulars in the congregation, most of a certain age, not really infirm and highly ambulatory. Before the new chapel opened in a distant building, prompting me to change venues because of inaccessibility, people came and left so fast after Communion it was practically a drive-thru.

Father was a student and had just completed his graduate degree. He would be leaving in a couple of weeks to return to his home diocese in Africa. Sorry to say, I do not remember his name. But I remember his face, his voice and one homily that changed me forever.

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It was the 25th Sunday of the Year, cycle A. The Gospel reading was -- and remains -- one of the most incendiary of Jesus' parables: that of the generous landowner and the vineyard workers he hired in the morning. Trouble came when the landowner hired workers throughout the day -- at the same wage.

> The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last. (Matthew 20: 1- 16 NRSV)

Father's gently modulated homily followed, as best I can remember it:

What do you think of this Gospel? Does it make you feel upset, that the landowner is not being fair?

Yes, we answered.

Ah, yes. Even in my own country, this Gospel makes people think Matthew must have made a mistake in writing it down, because Jesus would never be so unfair.

And we nodded our heads.

But let me tell you what I see here in southern California when I drive around for school or to visit the sick or to shop. I drive by the parking lots of Home Depot and other large stores and see men of all ages waiting to be hired. I know most are probably undocumented and many have wives and children here or in another country they support, or try to. Work means life to them, any work and any pay. Can you imagine how they feel as the hours tick by and no one hires them? Or can you imagine their joy when someone does? Why? Because even for a few hours, or even one, they would have *job security*.

You see, my brothers and sisters, what the landowner paid the vineyard workers was, yes, the wage he promised, but what they -- and we -- could not see, because they were grasping at some perception of injustice done to them, was *job security* that day. The diminishment of anxiety for a few hours. The day workers could be joyous with relief and generous if they chose to be, because they knew with almost absolute certainty they would be paid at the end of the workday. They had *job security*.

When you get your paycheck, Social Security or retirement check, what do you have? Security. Can you put yourself into the shoes of the men who wait at Home Depot and in other parking lots and worry and long for job security for just one day? Or a half a day, or an hour? Can you imagine their anxiety?

Most Catholic biblical commentaries interpret this Gospel to mean all people deserve eternal life, that in heaven we will all be the same. And this is true. But after living in your country these few years and seeing the poor waiting throughout the day, day after day, for enough work to sustain them and their families for just another day, I think this Gospel is telling us who have job security to be as generous as the landowner in thoughts, words and deeds. To offer job security or something like it to our neighbor. This is not a parable about justice to the day workers because the landowner paid what he promised to each worker, and it was what the worker agreed to. This is not about injustice to us 2,000 years later. It is about generosity and love for that neighbor in front of us who does not have house, home, work, food for their children, and perhaps not even safety. Comfort does not even come into it.

This Sunday, Jesus asks us to be generous and to think not only of ourselves and what we think we deserve. Because in these times, it could be any one of us standing in front of Home Depot. Can you think of your anxiety as the drivers in their pickup trucks choose others but not you? What it would be like to be without the security you have waiting for you, and I, after Mass? Maybe you have lived through this. Either way, let us be generous and share the reality of the job security we have with those who do not expect it, but hope, with all their hearts.

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The reason I have finally written down this homily is because of the debate over proposed federal budgets that excludes people from the benefits of living in a democracy -- security, a roof over one's head, enough to feed one's family and to care for them, an education, a job. The hyper-military rhetoric around the budget portends the diversion of essential funds that could be used for the good of people, such as job opportunities, so they will not be forced to live out of the cars.

When I think of all the people who lost their homes in the mortgage bust and the job crash that followed because

of the greed of unscrupulous lenders who didn't do anything illegal but whose actions were certainly unethical and unjust and from which they profited greatly -- well, this Gospel and homily came to mind.

A recent film nominated for an Oscar in 2012, "A Better Life," [1] tells the story of just such a worker in Los Angeles. An undocumented man, Carlos, played by Demián Bichir, waits in a parking lot with so many others, hoping for work. His anxiety seeps off the screen, and you feel what it means to want to give a child security, a better life, and to do this, you desperately need a job.

If you saw the 2006 Will Smith movie "The Pursuit of Happyness," [2] you will remember the worst moment in the film when Will Smith's character, carrying everything he owned in the world, had nowhere to take his son, no shelter even, not even his car, and they had to spend the night in the a subway station. The father has to think fast and create a story that will reassure the child and do something that will keep him safe for one more night. They rush into a restroom. It was the man's lowest moment. His anxiety and sorrow are palpable. In case you have never experienced this kind of anxiety or worry about feeding your family or keeping them warm and dry tonight, this movie offers a look into a true story of what it means for a father to be without job security.

Yes, this parable is about all of us being the same, equal before God on earth and in heaven. It is also about empathy, imagining the anxiety and pain of others who want to live, like us, in a system and culture that promotes life, family, community, education and work for all. This parable is a reminder that we cannot take anything with us when we die, except for the blessing of the good we do to others.

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Links:
[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Better_Life
[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pursuit_of_Happyness