

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

People usually say that this parable is not fair. The workers who came late shouldn't get as much as those who started early. But the last workers were trying to get hired. They were ready all day long, but no one put them to work. The first group knew from the start of the day that they would get paid, but the last group spent the day in anxiety, not knowing if they would receive enough money to put food on the table for their loved ones. The parable is not so much about the workers in the vineyard as it is about the generosity of the owner.

We've all been on both ends of this parable. At times we have received more than we deserved. In fact, that's often my response when people ask me, "How is life treating you?" I answer, "Better than I deserve." But we've also witnessed other people getting things they don't deserve. Someone at work may get a promotion that you think you should have gotten. Someone without much skill at golf gets lucky on a shot. Sometimes life seems as arbitrary as a game of musical chairs; if you happen to be near an empty seat when the music stops, you win.

The problem comes when people who have less envy those who have more. Envy can lead to crime. It can cause us to harm our neighbors because we care more about their possessions than about them. Last week in Rio de Janeiro three armed thieves stopped a car in a suburb to steal the possessions of the four people inside. One of the passengers was the Catholic archbishop. Suddenly, the thieves recognized him. They apologized. Then they went ahead and stole his cross and his ring, along with other possessions. Envy does that to people. It can affect any of us. We become so envious of someone else's possessions, their family, their home, their election, or their promotion that it turns our heart to thoughts of evil.

Back in the fourth century, Saint John Chrysostom gave different advice. He said, "Rejoice in your neighbor's progress." That will immediately give glory to God.

We sometimes cry out in pain to God because we feel cheated. We can't find good work. We don't have good health. Someone we love has died. But we've already received the gift of life, the love of God, and the opportunity to love our neighbor. Other people probably envy that. Jesus basically says to us what the owner of the vineyard says to the workers: "My friend, I'm not cheating you. You already have a treasure." Sometimes somebody else's blessing makes us feel resentful, and it keeps us from rejoicing in something good. If we feel envious of others, it may be that we have not sufficiently thanked God for the gifts we have. When we are content with God's gifts to us, we can rejoice in God's gifts to others. God has given generously; we can too.