

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's parable rankles people who treasure justice: You should be paid exactly for the work you do. But it also stirs up a sense of entitlement. If somebody else gets an unexpected perk, then I should get one too. But inequities are part of life. Some people are born into countries and families where they get a head start; others live where they struggle to find food every day. Some people naturally play sports better than others, or they excel at music or math where others feel inept. Medications that work for one patient don't work for someone else with the same condition. These inexplicable inequities come with being a human being. Why should someone else get more when I get exactly enough? The landowner's short answer in the parable is, "I'm not cheating you."

When we do not appreciate the many blessings we have and obsess instead over the possessions of someone else, we fall to one of the most common and confining sins: envy. We want what someone else has.

The parable's landowner rewarded those who worked. The workers were not taking advantage of him, cheating on the job, or stealing his goods. When criminals come out ahead, we are justifiably rankled, but this parable addresses charity to the innocent.

Psalms 145 ascribes to the Lord a series of qualities we also heard in last week's responsorial, Psalm 103: "The Lord is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger, abounding in mercy. How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures." "His greatness cannot be measured." Envy keeps us from seeing how beautiful that is. The Lord's behavior is admirable, but we often find it unfair to us. Envy keeps us from rejoicing with the person who has received favors. It focuses on our own yearnings instead of the blessings we already have and the pleasures that abound in an earth teeming with examples of compassion, innumerable acts of charity, and blessings where we least expect them. The favors of another could even enliven our hopes that God will bestow more favors elsewhere—on parts of the world that dwell in oppression or even upon us.

That message resounds in the refrain for today's psalm, "The Lord is near to all who call upon him." Spend time with those who are poor, homeless, or hungry, and you'll be amazed at how spiritual many of them are. They are happy to be alive, delighted at the kindness of others, relieved that God eases even the slightest of their burdens, and joyful about the smallest blessing. Some of those who experience plenty have different feelings: They want even more of what they have, especially when others obtain things they have not yet purchased. Envy misaligns priorities. Too often we call upon our own abilities, our own connections, our own insiders to move us ahead in the line. But the Lord is not near to those who act entitled. The Lord is near to those who call upon him.

Today's parable and psalm invite us to find contentment both in what we have and in the blessings that others receive. Just because someone else is blessed doesn't mean we got cheated. It means we have another occasion to praise the compassion of God. Instead of demanding what someone else received, we could imitate the One who gave.