

Twenty Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

A lawyer's dog, running around town unleashed, heads for a butcher shop and steals a roast. The butcher goes to the lawyer's office and asks, "If a dog running unleashed steals a piece of meat from my store, do I have a right to demand payment for the meat from the dog's owner?" The lawyer answers, "Absolutely." "Then you owe me \$8.50. Your dog was loose and stole a roast from me today." The lawyer, without a word, writes the butcher a check for \$8.50. The butcher, with a feeling of satisfaction, leaves. Three days later, the butcher finds a bill from the lawyer for \$100— for consultation.

Dear Friends,

Our readings last Sunday challenged us to imitate our heavenly Father by forgiving others as he forgives us. Today's readings continue in a similar vein. They challenge us not to resent God's magnanimity but strive, rather, to reflect his generosity in our relations with one another.

The first reading from the prophet Isaiah reminds us that God does not think the way we think, nor act the way we act: 'The heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts' (Is 55: 9).

The Gospel explains how God's ways are different than ours. The first noteworthy element is that it is the owner himself who goes out in search of workers for his vineyard. This was not the normal practice for an employer in Jesus' day. If he needed extra workers he would send his foreman, or one of his employees, to the marketplace to pick them up. This Vineyard Owner, however, goes to the marketplace himself. And he goes there several times, at different hours of the day, in search of workers to harvest his grapes. He is not just concerned about his business.

He is clearly concerned also about the predicament of those who have been standing around all day in the hope of finding someone to hire them. In today's corporate world, it could be done by other people. This parable shows that he cares for his people.

The second significant element in the story has to do with the wages the workers receive at the end of the day. I think he gave what was due to each one. It may not be fair in the world's eye. We expect a lot of things from God. It doesn't mean that he has to provide everything. The lesson we learn is that God provides people what they need at the appropriate time.

Finally, we come to the main point of the parable, the last words of the Vineyard Owner: 'Why be envious because I am generous. These words alert us to what the parable is all about. It is not about work and wages, about industrial relations or social justice. It is about God's magnanimity of heart, his extravagant generosity, especially to the late comers, those overlooked, left behind, or pushed to the margins of society.

The great biblical Scholar, N.T. Wright, makes the same point as Pope Benedict. He states that 'God doesn't make contracts with us, as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. He makes covenants, in which he promises us everything and asks of us everything in return. When he keeps his promises, he is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally to his over-flowingly generous nature.'