

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Amazing Grace

From our earliest years, we Americans have been brought up to value justice. *Play fair* is part of our earliest training in life. That's why when we hear today's Gospel, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, we immediately think, "That's just not right. The guys who worked all day have a good argument. They should have been paid more."

But the parable is not about who should get paid what. The parable is about God. He is the Good Employer, the Divine Employer. This parable is not about the workers, it is about God who offers His grace to people at various times in their lives.

The story of John Newton certainly illustrates this. John Newton was born in London in 1725. His father was the captain of a merchant ship that sailed the Mediterranean. When John was just 11, he went to sea with his father. After six voyages, his father retired. John had attained the rank of a junior officer, but he decided to seek another life. However, the British navy had another idea. He was impressed, forced into service on a warship, the HMS Harwich. John hated it. He particularly hated the demeaning way he and everyone on board was treated. So, he deserted. But he was quickly captured. For that he was flogged, demoted, and treated even worse. His only way off that brutal ship ended up being traded to the worst possible ship. John requested to be exchanged to a ship that was a slave trader, working the waters off of Sierra Leone, Africa. He was brutally abused there also, but his luck changed when he was rescued by a captain of another slave ship who had known John's father. John had merchant in his blood. He saw the money being made off of slaves. He didn't care about their suffering. They were profit and only profit. He worked his way up and helped that slaver make even more money. Eventually, John became the captain of his own slave ship.

Now, he really prospered. John had little to no religious convictions. He did not care whether God approved or did not approve of his business. If some of the Africans died in those cramped, stinking storage bins, to John that was just part of the business. Then on one homeward trip, everything changed. John Newton found religion. Or religion found him. He was attempting to steer the ship through a violent storm. He was convinced that all would be lost. Just as he thought the ship would sink, he surprised himself by calling out, "Lord, have mercy on us." The storm started to abate.

John reflected on this and was convinced that God had spoken to him through the storm. He changed his life and gave himself to God. He quickly got out of the slave business. More than that, he joined Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and others in abolishing slavery in Britain in 1834. After marrying, John immersed himself in the study of theology and was ordained an Anglican priest and named as pastor of Olney, in England. There he met a poet named William Cowper. The two collaborated on writing new Church hymns, known as the Olney hymnal.

You know his work very well, at least his most famous hymn. As you read these words that we sing so often, think of them as coming from a former slaver who was called away from cruelty, away from the great profit to be made on other people's lives, and called to the Lord. The hymn I am referring to is, of course, Amazing Grace:

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears reliev'd;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believ'd!
Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

Now, is there anyone that feels that God had been unfair? After all, God saved the life of this slaver. How many hundreds died on Newton's ship? How many thousands more wished they had died. How many tens of thousands of their descendants would be treated as chattel? Yet, God reached out and brought conversion to a person who had ignored Him for years. Would any of us dare tell God that he was unjust? Or, would any of us say, "How about me, Lord? I have worked hard to serve you from the very beginning of my life. Surely, my reward will be greater than John Newton's." No, we wouldn't say that. We have all received Grace from God. We are not going to begrudge John Newton his opportunity to grow in God's love. Nor would we question God for being so generous to Newton, and expect him to be even more generous to us. It is not up to us to determine how God rewards those who serve him.

That is what the parable of the laborers in the vineyard is really about. God's grace comes to different people at different times and in different ways.

Look at some of the amazing ways that God has changed people we know. So often we have all encountered a person who has done serious damage to his or her life and family through alcohol or other chemical dependency. Then we marvel how God's Grace not only led that person to recovery, but made him or her a source of strength for others looking to recover. That is the amazing Grace of the Divine Employer.

St. John Paul II was very much aware of the working of God's Mercy. He addressed women who had suffered through an abortion and now mourned the loss of the baby they had killed. He empowered them with the determination to work for life and protect other women from going through what they went through. This is the

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Sadly, many of us have given up on ourselves. But the Lord never gives up on us. Sometimes, we have the view that "it is just too late". We think that something we have done in our past is so terrible that God could never return us to a full share of His love. If this type of thought has come into your mind, let me tell you with the authority of the Gospel: You are wrong. You are judging by human standards, not by the standards of the Love and Mercy and Compassion of the Lord. God never gives up. He never gives up on us. We do not have the right to give up on ourselves. We can always start new, whether we have just been lukewarm Christians or whether we have been at war with God. Not only does God refuse to hold us to our pasts, He transforms us to become vehicles of conversion for others. The Divine Employer does not want us wasting any more time. Even if we are well advanced in age, and the day is drawing to a close, He still has work for us to do.

He wants us to work for Him, no matter what our pasts have been.

What Mercy! What Grace! Amazing!