Reading 1  Isaiah 55:6-9

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call him while he is near. Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked his thoughts; let him turn to the LORD for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.

Reading 2  Philippians 1:20C-24, 27A

Brothers and sisters: Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me life is Christ, and death is gain. If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. And I do not know which I shall choose. I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, for that is far better. Yet that I remain in the flesh is more necessary for your benefit. Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Gospel  Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus told his disciples this parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. Going out about nine o’clock, the landowner saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’ So they went off. And he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise. Going out about five o’clock, the landowner found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’ When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.’ When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage. So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’ He said to one of them in reply, ‘My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?’

Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

HOMILY

When I hear this Gospel story of the workers in the vineyard, I think of my father-in-law, who passed away a little over 5 years ago at age 93. He lived in a smaller house on Long Island just a couple of hundred feet from a very busy avenue. He would often see a group of young men in the morning, standing around a few buildings on the avenue, waiting for someone to stop and offer one or more of them some type of employment for the day, in this upscale area where there were many contractors often needing workers for hard, manual labor, day-by-day. He had told us that he would occasionally bring them some clothes that he didn’t need any more. As I recall, he never said what percentage of them were
typically hired, but some must have been, or else why would they continue to stand and wait. Likewise, they must have done reasonably good work, or else word would have gotten around among the contractors and no-one would bother to hire them anymore. … Again, hearing this Gospel story, I think of someone else I know in the metro New York area who was installing an extensive stone patio some years back. As a typical do-it-yourselfer, he started out by himself, but then a dose of reality set in – he considered what he had to do. You know, digging out the dirt, removing rocks, grading, leveling, moving and setting the heavy stone blocks … in the middle of the summer, on hot and humid days much like today … by himself. He decided he needed some help, quickly, so he visited a local shopping area which he knew to have several young men gathered outside early each morning, men who were waiting for someone to stop and offer some work for the day. He hired 2 of them to help, and help they did – in a few days they were finished, with a quality patio that looked like it was done by professionals.

In today’s Gospel passage and in those two stories, we see people looking for work, not in an aggressive way, but rather passively, “standing idle in the marketplace,” as the Gospel notes. It’s the landowner, or the Long Island contractor boss, or my friend, who actively pursues them. But one major difference – the Gospel landowner keeps going back, even until the last hour of the day, until everyone who is looking for work is hired, and at the same daily rate as those hired early in the day. What employer, then or now, could afford to remain in business, to be competitive, to maintain morale among his or her workforce, by paying everyone the same daily wage no matter what time they started? And consider the laborers … as workers, then or now, we would most likely side with those who worked all day for the daily wage, grumbling against the landowner, or the Long Island contractor, or my friend, thinking the all-day workers were being treated “unfairly”. “Fairness” – is that the real issue? The Gospel landowner voiced a different take on his action: “My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?” “Generosity!” – AHA! That’s it! Another story – my wife went to a garage sale some time ago where the homeowner, a woman, was selling items at very low prices. They chatted a bit and the woman happened to tell my wife that she had this costly toy that she was offering for $10, a price that seemed to be an exceptional value. She said that a family stopped over, a family that might have been immigrants with very limited resources. A young boy had his eyes affixed on the toy and kept asking for it, until the gentleman, apparently the father, gave a stern “No!” The woman, seeing how much the boy really wanted the toy, offered it to them for an even lower price. The father said “No,” again, and they started walking away. The woman called after them and offered the toy to the lad for free. The offer was graciously accepted, and the boy was completely overjoyed! … If someone else was witnessing this generous act, what reaction would they have had? Back to our Gospel story, we don’t know why those hired later in the day could not be there earlier. Perhaps, there were legitimate reasons … or maybe not. To the vineyard landowner, he knew that they needed a day’s pay to make ends meet – he was being quite generous.

Generous – it’s a word also found in our First Reading, from Isaiah: “Seek the LORD while he may be found, call him while he is near. Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked his thoughts; let him turn to the LORD for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving.” In his homily a few weeks ago, Fr. Bob noted that there are often multiple layers of meanings in the Gospel writings. Looking again at today’s Gospel passage, we can see that God, the vineyard landowner in the story, is exceptionally generous. In the kingdom of heaven, God is exceptionally generous in forgiving, even the scoundrel and the wicked, if they seek the Lord, turning to the Lord for mercy, at any point in time. God leaves the mercy door open to us at all times, God is always there, waiting to shower His mercy, waiting to forgive us, waiting for us to come to that roadside corner, to that shopping center, to meet Him. And
God never gives up, God never gives up on us, God never gives up on anyone. No matter the sin, God wants us to seek Him, God waits for us to seek Him, even until our last dying breath. How hopeful and how reassuring that is, not only for us but for loved ones who may still be resisting God in some ways! As the Coordinator of the diocesan Project Rachel team, widely recognized as the post-abortion healing ministry of the Catholic Church for both women and men, I have heard of people who have come to ask for God’s mercy many years later, as much as several decades afterwards. And then, there’s the story of the good thief, crucified alongside Christ, who was assured by Christ of his place in heaven due to his last-minute conversion. God never gives up on us.

And what about us in our relationships with others, with both those we know and don’t know? How generous in forgiving, how generous in our treatment of others, are we? God knows that we have a long way to go, as Isaiah also points out, “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.” Following God’s way may be challenging, and made even more challenging by increasing attacks on our faith and morals, attacks on the dignity and importance of every human life, from the moment of conception until natural death, and attacks on our God – attacks that seem to come from every direction – from the so-called entertainment industry, from political leaders, from medical and other spokespersons, attacks that confuse our value system, confuse our consciences, and even confuse our identity as children of an all-loving and all-forgiving God. Following God’s way may be challenging, but it is not impossible. God lovingly offers us all the help we need. Returning to Isaiah, “Seek the Lord ... call Him.” Christ has promised that He will always be there for us. Pray for the world, pray for all who need God’s mercy, pray for those confused in their faith. God is exceptionally generous in his mercy, exceptionally generous in forgiveness, exceptionally generous in loving each and every one of us. God will never give up on us. We should never give up on ourselves, and never give up on others – after all, we are all at the vineyard, or the roadside corner, or the shopping center, at different times of our lifelong day.