September 21, 2014
25th Sunday of Ordinary Time:
“Strive for Five – A Consistent Life Ethic”
Deacon Dave Snyder

GOSPEL READING – MT 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
“Strive for Five!”
Those of you who have been around the area for a number of years may remember when this slogan first appeared. Back in 1991, Wegman’s Food Markets introduced the Strive for Five program to encourage everyone to have 5 servings a day of fruits and veggies. Now, I said strive because the average person wasn’t consuming anywhere near 5 servings a day, and nutritionists were cheering on the idea of less fat, more fruits, more veggies. “It’s good for you, physically” they might say, “It’ll help you reach a goal of … better physical health.”

“Strive for Five!”
And then, there’s the Bills … yeah, those Buffalo Bills. You may have heard me talk about them before. Any Bills fans out there today? Hmm … many more than the last time I asked – see how excited you fans get because they won their first two games of the season? Well, from 1990-through 1993, those Bills got a lot of people excited by going to the Super Bowl each year – each year, there was a fever pitch – YES, each year they were going to do it!
– only to have that excitement drop afterwards when they lost the big game each year. After that 4th year, and going through the 1994 season, hope was building again for the fans, and this time, the Bills were going to WIN that Super Bowl ring! All they had to do was … get there. One more Super Bowl … one more time … to get that Super Bowl goal. So, the rallying cry for some fans became …

“Strive for Five!”

One more story … there’s a fellow I know who isn’t too far from retirement, “Just another few years”, he says. During a recent company cutback, he adopted his personal rallying cry regarding the number of years to go before he reaches that retirement goal. That cry? …

“Strive for Five!”

In case you are wondering what these stories have to do with today’s readings, and the homily, well, all have a common theme – pushing oneself more, towards an important goal of some kind. In line with our parish vision of **We Believe, We Belong**, and over these past few weeks and the next few weeks of including **We Learn**, I’d like to talk about a spiritual **goal** of **learning** more about the life issues that are all around us, that confront us in our everyday life, and of the very positive steps that are going on in our parish, our diocese, nation and world. Now, why should you care about these life issues? Well, two primary reasons, although there can be others: first, it’s our faith, it’s what we believe as Catholic Christians, it’s who we are, it’s what we do; second, because these issues are all around us, and knowing more about them may help us to help others when needed.

“Strive for Five!” – The Consistent Ethic of Life

The 25 cent summary of the Consistent Life Ethic, shortcut as CLE, is that ALL human life is very sacred, a gift from God, from conception until natural death, and we **ought** to treat it as such, we **need** to treat it as such. There is a multitude of life issues facing us in today’s world, but the 5 deemed most important – you were probably wondering where the number 5 from our stories was going to fit in – the 5 deemed most important deal with abortion, poverty, capital punishment, euthanasia or mercy-killing, and violence, although some have considered unjust war in place of violence in the past.

“Strive for Five!” – The Consistent Ethic of Life

Regarding today’s Gospel reading and its relationship with the CLE, there are at least two very interesting and inter-related points. When you first heard this parable, you might have
tended to take the side, as I did years ago, of those poor workers who started early in the morning and who had to work all day long in the heat for a day’s wage. Really, if you were in their place, wouldn’t you feel at least a little bit upset when you saw those who worked for only an hour getting the same day’s wage as you? “Not fair;” you’d probably join in with the others who also worked the full day. But, consider that in Jesus’ time a day’s wage was typically a denarius coin, and that would generally cover the cost for a day’s food and other living expenses for a family of four. If you, as a family bread-winner, didn’t work that day, then you and your family would somehow have to struggle through until the next day, when you could hopefully find work for a “day’s wage.” So, consider this – the landowner was showing mercy towards the workers who were in the vineyard for shorter periods of time – he knew that they may have expected only a portion of a day’s wage, but he generously gave them what they and their families needed for the day. We don’t know why those last workers were not around earlier – maybe they had valid reasons, maybe not – either way, the landowner showed them mercy, helping to keep them out of poverty, at least for the day – poverty, one aspect of CLE.

Let’s look at the story another way. Workers in the vineyard represent those trying to spread the Gospel message. Those recruited early in the morning represent those who faithfully try to do God’s Will throughout their lives. Workers recruited at various points during the day represent those who have experienced conversion later on in life. And the workers who put in that final hour only? They represent those who have come to accept Christ, repenting in their final years, final days, maybe even final hours from a former life of misdeeds. Just as the landowner is always ready to hire workers at virtually any time of the day, God is ready to extend His mercy at virtually any time of a person’s life, ready to accept a sinner into His Kingdom – ready to accept us back, because we all sin, don’t we. Each worker received a symbol of the love of God, the vineyard owner. All workers got exactly the same, total love of God. God cannot and will not give more of His love to one than another. How reassuring that may be for us, if we truly believe that. How happy do we feel when we hear of someone returning to Christ. But, do we really celebrate for a hardened criminal who has a deathbed conversion? Or, are we ready to join with others, who cry out, “Not fair,” that that former criminal may enter God’s Kingdom at literally the last moment, purgatory notwithstanding. From a CLE standpoint, could we be willing to extend mercy and allow that criminal the opportunity to convert his or her life in the future, by foregoing any planned capital punishment.
And if that criminal has already converted, could we extend our mercy, as Jesus has, by respecting that criminal’s life and allowing him or her to live it out until its natural end, without capital punishment. Or, would we join with others who cry out, “Not fair,” and seek vengeance, demanding capital punishment, with or without conversion, without mercy, without respect for life – capital punishment, another tenet of CLE. It’s tough, isn’t it. But, God’s ways are not always our ways, as the First Reading reminds us.

“Strive for Five!” – The Consistent Ethic of Life

My sisters and brothers in Christ, let’s try to tie all of this together. 1) The Church teaches a respect for all human life from conception to natural death. Today’s Gospel reading especially pertains to two aspects of CLE. The others – violence, abortion and euthanasia – can be addressed more fully in the future. 2) This coming week begins the start of “Forty Days for Life,” an annual awareness campaign gaining widespread acceptance, celebrating respect for human life, especially at its earliest stages. Starting next week, and throughout October, there will be a box at each entrance to the Church, together with listings of simple things that each member of your family can do to show respect for the lives of others. Take a list, on the yellow sheets of paper, and each time you come to Church while the box is there, jot down on a piece of paper something you’ve done and put the paper in the box. 3) October, a few short days away, has traditionally been celebrated by the Church as Respect Life Month. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, USCCB, puts together a package of material at this time each year to help us learn more about different life issues. This year, it’s very noteworthy that the USCCB has included capital punishment in its focus, besides others that we normally think of as life issues – violence, abortion, euthanasia, and poverty. I can almost guarantee you that if you consider all of these issues as part of a Consistent Ethic of Life, and if you read about them, learn more about them, and pray about them, your spiritual outlook will change. It may be quite challenging, but very rewarding. “It’s good for you, spiritually” some might say, “It’ll help you reach a goal of … better spiritual health.” And, 4) one final point, St. Louis has a CLE group – please see me for any additional information as to what we do.

“Strive for Five!” – The Consistent Ethic of Life – it’s all about God’s love and mercy being available to all of us. Jesus has asked that we likewise extend that love and mercy to those around us. Let’s continue our Eucharistic celebration, commemorating His great mercy and love.