

Sunday, September 24, 2023

#Homily by Father Karl Daigle

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A-2023

In our #Gospel reading, Jesus invites us to allow our lives to dialogue with the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. The details of the parable can be quite confusing and disturbing on the surface. It all seems so unfair! Sifting through it all, the bottom line is this. No matter when we come to Jesus Christ, whether it is as a child, teenager, young adult, middle age, in our wisdom years, or at the hour of death, God will give us the fullness of Himself. God only knows how to love us one way: generously, lavishly, and wholeheartedly. There are no half measures or a divided heart with God. We will personally discover this relational reality to the degree that we open our hearts and lives to Him.

The only thing that can hold us back from being transformed by the steady stream of God's love flowing in us and through us is our own free will. God will respect the boundaries that we personally establish in our relationship with Him. This reminds me of a religious picture that really pierces my soul. It is an image of Jesus knocking on a door. The thing that really captures my attention is that there is no doorknob. The doorknob is on the other side of the door. The image conveys the spiritual truth that God continually knocks on the door of our hearts, but we are the only ones who can let Him in. Jesus will not break down the door and force Himself on us against our will. Love not freely given is no love at all. Coercing or manipulating someone to love us is no love at all.

Even though Jesus does not force Himself on us, He loves us too much to wipe His hands of us. In subtle and direct ways, in a conventional or unconventional manner, He is always inviting us, calling us, and seeking us out. He does this through our conscience, our thoughts and feelings, our yearnings and longings, other people, and the circumstances of our lives. The English poet Francis Thompson referred to God as the "Hound of Heaven." In this context, the hound is meant to have a positive connotation. God not only hounds us when we are far away from Him. He even hounds us whenever we are close to Him. Through His hounding, He is inviting us to come closer. He is inviting us to the next level. He is calling us to surrender our whole lives and be in a spirit of trust. And if we do, and as we do, He gives Himself fully to us. The Sacred Scriptures reveal that this is truly God's delight because, individually and collectively, we are His children, friends, and beloved. The Bible states that He calls us each by name. As He calls us by name, He says to us: "I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have called you, and you are mine."

Even though God fully receives us whenever we choose to come to Him, it is important to realize that we are hurting ourselves and other people when we decide to ignore God, keep Him at arm's length, or reject Him and His will altogether or in certain aspects of our lives. It has been said that "we have a God-sized hole in our hearts, and only God can fill it." If we are not in union with Him, lasting joy and fulfillment will elude us. In the long run, we will experience emptiness, restlessness, and a crisis of meaning. We will also eventually experience heartache and addiction.

God, and the will of God, is meant to bless and protect us by showing us the path of true joy and mission in this life and eternal happiness in the next. It is in freely embracing God and the will of God that our eyes will be open to our inherent dignity and that of other people. We more fully live into the best version of ourselves that is loving, giving, merciful, and good. We are better able to see how our sins, whether serious or less serious, hurt ourselves and other people and, therefore, in turn, hurt God.

One dynamic that can tempt us to keep God at arm's length is the belief that we are always starting at ground zero. Since we are habitually struggling with sin, usually the same ones, we feel like we are always at point "A." This black-and-white thinking, this all-or-nothing perspective, keeps us feeling discouraged, paralyzed, hopeless, and totally defeated. The good news is if we keep on striving if we keep asking God for his mercy and grace, we are

not always starting at ground zero. We can pick up where we left off in our relationship with God and go from there. Some days, it will be three steps forward and two steps back. At other times, it will be two steps forward and three steps back, but it does not mean we are always starting at ground zero.

God does not deal with us with a tit-for-tat mentality or one in which He is holding our past against us. Instead, God wants us to live in the present moment, moving forward with joyful anticipation concerning the future. He wants the personal and spiritual lessons we learned in the past to bless us in the present moment as we live into an unknown future.

If we are not careful, the Gospel parable can present us with a very powerful temptation since God always gives us the fullness of Himself whenever we come to Him. Therefore, we can find ourselves putting off God and the will of God so we can live like we want in the present, with the plan of making things right at some future date.

There are some serious spiritual dangers with this way of thinking. The delay in giving ourselves generously and faithfully to God can affect our joy, peace, relationships, and our sense of meaning, as I discussed earlier.

It also reveals that we really don't love God and trust in His Word because we are putting Him off for as long as possible. We are putting off the One who is the source, meaning, and fulfillment of our existence.

Even though it is a disturbing and unnerving thought, death can come to us quite quickly and unexpectedly and catch us spiritually unprepared to meet the Lord. This brings to mind the following story.

The devil was training new recruits to win souls for the underworld. He asked the first recruit, "What would you do to gather souls for me?" He responded, "I would convince them there was no God." The devil responded, "That will get some, but since humanity is body and soul, they may come to a point where they become convinced of God's existence." The devil asked the second recruit what his method would be. He fired off, "I would convince them there was no hell." The devil smiled and responded, "That will get even more, but somewhere down the line, they may realize they are ultimately accountable for their actions." The devil asked the third recruit, "What would be your form of diabolical trickery?" He answered, "I would convince them that they have lots and lots of time." The devil could not control himself. He let out a blood-curdling cackle and responded, "Yes. Yes. I like it. I like it a lot."

The soap opera *#DaysOfOurLives* begins with the words: "Like sand through the hourglass, so are the days of our lives." The sand of our lives is always pouring from one end of the hourglass to the other. Eventually, the last grain of sand will fall, and our earthly lives will be over. Since we do not know the day or the hour, it is best not to gamble with the most priceless thing we possess: our eternal souls.

It is even possible that as we keep putting off God and His will, day after day, month after month, and year after year, our hearts become so blind and hardened that when the hour of death arrives, we no longer feel like we need God's mercy. Our attitude has become, "I haven't done anything wrong." "I'm good with God." "I have set up a special arrangement with God." It is possible to possess this attitude even though our lives are seriously contrary to the will of God as revealed through the Sacred Scriptures and church teaching. Dying in a spirit of rationalization and disobedience, we choose hell as our eternal dwelling place and permanent state of mind.

Now the opposite can also be true. Over time, we may become so consumed with guilt and shame that we completely despair that God will personally extend His mercy to us. We refuse to ask, but we are convinced that we will not receive. We believe our situation is beyond repair. Dying in a spirit of hopelessness and despair, we accept hell as our eternal dwelling place and permanent state of mind. It is not an exaggeration to state that habitually playing around with our relationship with God, and our eternal souls, is like "playing with fire."

The question I pose to all of us is, "Why put God off to tomorrow when we can have the fullness of God today and all the days of our lives?" Why are we tempted to view God as our last resort when He is the One person who loves us more than anyone else in the universe? When He is the One who provides us with the greatest joy? When He is the One who provides us with the greatest peace? When He is the One who provides us with the greatest mercy?

When He is the only One who can provide us with eternal life? We are meant to enjoy His love all along the way as He leads us into the fullness and abundance of life, both now and for all eternity.

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