

The Generous Landowner  
09/24/17

Jesuit Ed Dowling tells a story about a man named Dutch Schultz, a mobster during Prohibition. Dutch, the son of poor Jewish immigrants, found himself on the wrong side of the law at an early age and from there, things only got worse. Through a mixture of gall and brutality, including murder, he worked his way up to the top as a prominent mob leader.

He died as he had lived, in a hail of bullets, as he emerged from a restaurant. But before he expired, he was taken to a hospital where a priest came to him and explained the tenets of the faith. Dutch Schultz repented of his sins and asked to be baptized. The priest baptized him immediately and soon after he died.

Our Catholic teaching holds that anyone who dies immediately after Baptism goes straight to heaven. But instead of joy in the Church that a sinner had been saved, there was a public outcry. People were outraged that a man who had spent his life in crime and was a self-admitted multiple murderer should go scot-free into heaven when they had to toe the line and keep the Commandments all their life long.

It seemed totally unfair and led many to question the justice of God. While understandable from a human point of view, however, it was far from Christian. Jesus tells us to rejoice at the conversion of a sinner and never to be jealous of God's love for others.

This self-same attitude existed in the time of Jesus, as seen so often in the Pharisees. They felt they had earned God's love by their observance of the Mosaic Law and it was unfair of God to allow others such as sinners or tax collectors, who either flaunted God's law or were ignorant of it, to share in the same rewards. Now we come to today's parable.

It isn't hard to see that Jesus proposes this parable to strike down the self-righteous attitude of the Pharisees and show that God's love is bigger than anyone can ever imagine. After all, the owner promised the usual daily wage to all, regardless of when they started working. Likewise, our gracious and merciful God promises eternal life to all who enter into relationship with Him, whenever we do so and even after we fall. And that is pure gift.

Dominican Laurie Brink reminds us we are not entitled to it. In fact, we can be blinded by God's generosity to those we think undeserving. Envy blinds us to God's nearness at all times and keeps us from gratitude for such generous mercy.

The prophet Isaiah told us in the first reading that God is generous in forgiving and that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. For that, we can be forever grateful. You see, God's justice looks more like human mercy.

Certainly we can cry unfair but in the end, shouldn't we be glad that God's ways are not our ways? The workers hired first agreed for a fair and honest wage for an honest day's work. Yet when they received the same wage as those hired last, they cried foul. They felt angry, used, mistreated. And what was the response of the landowner: Am I not free to be generous? Do you despise my generosity?

The last shall be first. Several Christians of renown were late hires. St. Augustine, Avery Dulles and Dorothy Day are just a few who came late to the vineyard but fashioned lives of great consequence. Remember that Pope Francis once said that the Church is like a field hospital, a place where saints and sinners can find forgiveness and mercy.

In the end, it's never too late to come to the vineyard. If you're one of the fortunate ones who came early and have kept up the good work, praise God! Thank God! If you have not yet come to the vineyard, know that God is as patient as He is merciful.