

Baltimore Carmel- Lectio Divina

Reflection on Mathew's Gospel- "The Laborers in the Vineyard." Mt 20: 1-16 Sr. Teresa Maya, CCVI

Before I begin offering my reflection, I first want to thank the Baltimore Carmel for inviting us into their *lectio* so creatively, Sisters; you have blessed us with this sacred space during challenging times. I have imagined contemplative communities were better equipped for lockdown than the rest of us! You know, monastics, the vow of stability. But you might disagree!

Secondly, I believe it is critical for us to be mindful of the reality where we stand as we listen to the Gospel Narrative. We hear Jesus' words from this social and personal context, and there is much heartache in our world right now. I dare to share a few images that have "placed" this reflection for me; each one of us has our own, and I share them just because this virtual tech environment allows me to! The apocalyptic fires the people of California are enduring. With its mushroom cloud of ash! The haunting cover of Time Magazine this week- reminding us of the loss we have experienced as a nation. And, last night- instead of reviewing this reflection, I fell asleep looking at the images of people gathered to pay their respects to Ruth Bader Ginsburg. May she rest in peace – and may her passion for justice be ours. We hear the Gospel story from where we stand; let us be mindful of how we enter the story this week.

Today I offer my reflection on this Sunday's Gospel, mostly because I am not a scripture scholar and can't do anything else! As I prayed and pondered with it I think we need to change its usual title from the "Laborers in the vineyard," to the "Good owner of the vineyard," or "God's Teachings on employment." The parable follows the section of Mathews' Gospel, where Jesus uses implausible, almost unbelievable stories to explain God's goodness. Isaiah, in the first reading tomorrow, offers the final clue: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.*

My first reading of the story of the good owner going back and forth to hire laborers for his vineyard throughout the day reminded me of a trip to Laguna Beach, California, for a Healthcare Board retreat, in our long-ago lives – last January- when we could travel! The airport van taking us to the hotel was making its way through the California landscape, rolling hills, ocean views, and I was taking it all in. When we turned a corner, I froze as I saw a "Day laborer Hiring" site. I tapped the person in front of me and asked if I had actually seen signage for a place to hire day labor? The event operator overheard and made her way to my seat to explain that the City of Laguna Beach had finally settled into creating and regulating those sites, after a heated political debate, to avoid, she explained what happens outside "Home Depot." Then I remembered the issues of undocumented migrants standing outside Home Depots all over the United States waiting to be hired for the day. I want to show you some of those pictures as we reflect on today's Gospel, simply because we might be tempted

to explain Jesus' upside-down logic by trying to contextualize his parable in first-century Palestinian traditional and more agricultural societies. "In Jesus' time," I have heard many preachers say... "this is how people were hired."

This Gospel invites us to see the world of labor with a different set of eyes; it requires a conversion of heart even to be able to "notice" how food comes to our table, how our cities are built, how they are cleaned and repaired and landscaped.

My second reading of the parable had me wondering about the people in the story: Where do we place ourselves in the story? As early day laborers hired from the beginning, who question the landowner's fairness; or as the laborers hired toward the end of the day, startled by the equal pay as the day closes; or, are we, especially in North America, especially in our more comfortable financial position, called to place ourselves as the landowner? The narrative allows us to shift from one side of the story to the other.

We are usually the day laborers, shocked or angered by the generosity of the landowner. They each get one line in the story: those hired late will say, "*Because no one has hired us.*" and those hired early will say, "*These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.*"

Good practicing Christian people that we are, and also a bit workaholic and driven, we usually sympathize with those who worked all day. No matter how small or significant we consider our task to be, we always expect fairness. Our very human sense of justice is bred in us early on. Even as children, we expected things to be precisely divided among us. I have the bad luck of having grown up in a family with three siblings- in a world made for even-numbered families- four seats at a table, two windows in the back seat, two double beds in a hotel room... which always led to endless discussions about whose turn it was. We get the sentiment of those who labored in the heat all day. What could Jesus be talking about? How do you turn this into HR policy, same pay for unequal work, not possible, not fair? We enter the narrative from our very human, immediate sense of justice.

Other times, if we are honest with ourselves, our vulnerability, our limitations, we identify with the laborers that came later to the vineyard. Sometimes we have experienced generosity beyond our efforts; sometimes, we have been silent when we have been favored and know we are undeserving; sometimes, we have been delighted to simply have a chance. In religious life, for those who know us, we have a very subtle "pecking" order, we talk about "class or band"- and everything is organized by year of entrance. Being a middle child of this religious life, I can tell you it took me 20 years to realize I could say something. It was ok because I was constantly reminded that "*you didn't work there, you have no idea what it was like, you didn't meet them..*,"—which always made me feel, not only that I had missed everything interesting that had happened in my community, but also that I did not have right to suggest anything; after all, "*we have done that, we have been there, or who do you think you are.*" We have all

had the experience of unfair generosity, like the laborers hired later in the day we have been shocked to be paid like the rest. Like them, we have often remained mute at that point. Perhaps, not wanting anyone to notice, just in case this was a random mistake, not wanting to jinx this sudden turn in our luck! We can all find experiences of being the early laborer or the latecomers in different moments in our lives.

Yet, even if we read the story through the lens of human fairness, the times we have been called to live require we let the line of the laborers hired late truly speak to us: "*Because no one has hired us.*" Our sensibility to these words should be heightened because we live in a culture where work defines your worth as a human being. "*Because no one has hired us*" – forces us to make an honest effort to place ourselves in the shoes of our neighbor, our family member – the "unemployed." The people who will not get paid to put food on their table this week, the furloughed, those in the service industries, the hotels, the restaurants the airlines who CAREs act benefits are running out. The women who are silently leaving their jobs because someone needs to stay with the kids who are doing school online. Today our hearts should feel the pain in those words "*Because no one has hired us.*" What is this narrative calling us to with such overwhelming unemployment?

Given all this, I believe we are called to place ourselves in the perspective of the landowner in this story. This goodness that embraces and transcends our limited sense of justice and fairness is our call, especially at this time. We are called to "notice" how the laborers, human beings around our planet, have become commodities. We are called to "notice" that human beings searching to be dignified by the world of work are denied even basic human rights? And more importantly, called to question the logic of our labor systems, which continue dehumanize and commodify people. We are experiencing the double pandemic of the COVID-19, Time Magazine, so hauntingly reminds us of this week and of systemic racism. We have heard over and over again that our Black and Brown brothers and sisters are disproportionately affected by the virus because of the essential work they do. We should add the underpaid, insecure, unregulated, uninsured work that they do. More likely than not, we have been in the conversations in board meetings and organizations where we have decided to furlough, retire, or let go of staff and employees. How could Jesus expect us to be this kind of vineyard owner? Where are we going to get the resources to pay all these people? This parable needs to make us uncomfortable, like systemic racism and economic disparities should be making us uncomfortable. Perhaps then, we will gradually enter into the upside-down logic of God's goodness and gradually get the inspiration to begin the journey to the world where all human beings are dignified by their work- where everyone gets enough to put food on their table every day.

Finally, my third reading of this Gospel narrative took me back to Pope's Francis words in *Gaudete et Exultate*, his Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness. His constant reminders to return to God's grace offers some insight into the invitation Jesus is making to move beyond our human logic of justice into God boundless goodness. Francis warns us not to fall

into the temptation of contemporary Gnosticism or Pelagianism. When I first read *Gaudete et Exultate*, I remembered they were both heresies, but true confessions I had to go to "Wikipedia" to remember exactly what each of them stood for! Francis calls them the subtle enemies of holiness because each relies on human merit and understanding, instead of placing us before a "God that infinitely transcends us; [a God] full of surprises" [GE, 41]. The exhortation warns that we need to avoid the temptation of Gnosticism, which "turns Christian experience into a set of intellectual exercises that distance us from the freshness of the Gospel." [GE, 46) And the temptation of Pelagianism, which attributes all power to "human will, to personal effort" [GE48]. To enter into the narrative today, to understand our call to accompany Jesus into the boundless generosity that God invites us all to, we need God's grace. Our thoughts and actions alone are not enough!

So, my last reading ends with a prayer for all of us using Pope Francis words:

Unless we can acknowledge our concrete and limited situation, we will not be able to see the real and possible steps that the Lord demands of us at every moment, once we are attracted and empowered by his gift. Grace acts in history; ordinarily, it takes hold of us and transforms us progressively. If we reject this historical and progressive reality, we can actually refuse and block grace, even as we extol it by our words. [GE 50]

Friends, may our call to live into the boundless generosity of God be the result of our experience of God's grace.