

25th Sunday OT - (Year A) – September 24, 2017

IS 55:6-9; PS 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18; PHIL 1:20C-24, 27A; MT 20:1-16A

Weddings don't always bring out the best in the invited guests.

That's due, in large part, to the fact that so much of what goes into a wedding—from **dresses**, to **invitations**, to **tuxedos**, to the **food** and **music** at the reception—so much of it is *a matter of taste*. So, it should not surprise us that, when people with diverse backgrounds and preferences gather for a wedding, **negative chatter** about **some detail or another** is quite common.

One of the most *uncharitable* wedding criticisms is the suggestion that “**the bride should not be wearing white**”—**white** being a symbol of *purity*—and the implication being that a bride gave up her **purity**, her *virginity*, well before the wedding date.

Now, in our culture, the percentage of brides—and **grooms**, for that matter!—who have protected their virginity for marriage is **significantly lower** than it was, say, a hundred years ago when it was **still** considered a *virtue* to save oneself for one's spouse. And since it is the **white dress**—and *not* the **dark tuxedo**—that symbolizes **purity**, gossip about a person's moral history tends to fall disproportionately on the **bride**, even if the groom was *equally unfaithful* in his commitment to chastity before marriage.

It's important to pause here and remember that **people who are at peace with themselves don't tend to gossip or gripe about others**. With that in mind, let's look at the Readings.

In the parable that Jesus told in today's Gospel passage, the workers who labored all day made an agreement—**up front**—with the landowner. The landowner kept his end of the agreement, which is why, after these particular workers became angry at **paycheck time**, he said:

“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?” (Mt 20:13-15)

There was no reason, **objectively speaking**, for the laborers who worked the full day to complain. *Objectively speaking*. Had they been paid first and left, they would have had no reason to compare themselves with those who had worked less, because they would not have known what the others were paid. And that's precisely the point that Jesus wanted to make in the parable when he added **this** twist:

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.’ (Mt 20:8)

That’s the genius of this **parable**, which is no surprise, given the genius of the *storyteller*. The purpose of Jesus’ parables is not **entertainment**. The purpose of Jesus’ parables is **enlightenment**—the kind of enlightenment that exposes the darkness of sin in the hearts of the hearers—not just those who heard his words back then—but **you...and me...today**.

If we’re honest with ourselves, this twist in the parable bothers us...at least a little...because it offends our sense of justice, right? After all, people **should** be rewarded for going above and beyond the call of duty. But none of the laborers went above and beyond the call of duty in the parable. Everyone did what they agreed to do and the landowner did not short-change anyone. **The twist then, had to do with the landowner’s generosity...**the way **he** went above and beyond what was expected.

Given that fact, let’s circle back to the question of **wedding gossip**, because it provides an *excellent application of the parable’s principles to real life*. As we do this, keep in mind the landowner’s last words in the parable: ***Are you envious because I am generous?***” (Mt 20:15)

When we take *these particular words*—which are really **the Lord’s words to us**—and apply them to the **wedding gossip scenario**, it’s rather *eye opening*. Perhaps the person who disparages the bride was, **herself**, a virgin on her own wedding day. Perhaps there was no contradiction between her bodily purity and the color of her dress when **she** made **her** vows all those years before. And, yet, it very well could be that this woman had little or no sense of the **sacramental nature of marriage** on her own wedding day, but simply got married as a matter of **custom**, because maybe *that’s just what people did way back when*.

This older bride’s **dress** may have been the **right color**, but that does not necessarily mean that her **heart** was in the **right place**...then...or now.

Now...it’s an unfortunate fact that, many brides—not to mention the grooms—these days are **not** virgins on their wedding day. Many have **lived together without marriage** or have **only** been **married** according to **civil law**. They may already have **children**. And yet, many of these same couples are now preparing for marriage in the Church due to a profound **repentance**, a sincere **conversion**, and a burning **desire** to be right with God.

Whereas the hypothetical **gripping guest** only sees a *contradiction*, **God** sees the *purity of intention* of the repentant bride. Whereas the **busybody** sees a *hypocrite*, **God the Father** sees a *prodigal daughter* coming home. Because, as it says in the **1st Book of Samuel**:

[T]he Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (1 Sam 16:7)

The miserable gossip may have been a virgin on her wedding day years before, and may have even **stayed married for decades**. Yet, seeing a bride who had strayed from God in the beginning, now experiencing the same kind of joy on *her* wedding day in the Church, does not—*objectively speaking*—detract one bit from the grace and happiness *available* to the busybody from her own **sacramental marriage**. But there’s something in our fallen human nature that often compels us to focus on a **merely human**—and *decidedly narrow*—sense of “**justice**”, while remaining blind to God’s enormous **love** and **mercy**, and our own **envy**.

In the **1st Reading**, we heard the **Prophet Isaiah** speak these words about God:

Let them turn to the LORD to find mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving. (Isa 55:7)

This was the first of two instances that the word “**generous**” appeared in our Readings today, the other instance being—*as we have already heard*—the words that Jesus put in the mouth of the landowner in the parable: *Are you envious because I am generous?”* (Mt 20:15)

Bringing these two mentions of God’s **generosity** together causes *us* to face the convicting question:

Are you—am I—envious when God is generous in mercy to others who have not lived as faithfully as we have tried to live for as long as we have tried? Do we resent the fact that our faithfulness cost us more than theirs, because we made sacrifices while they did whatever they wanted...and now we see them also receiving God’s favor?

There’s another important consideration in the parable, namely, the contrast between the **idleness** of the workers hanging around the marketplace and the **productive work** that the landowner wanted to elicit from these laborers. And just as the landowner sought out workers to harvest his grapes, **the Lord seeks out every single baptized Christian**—every one of you—and me—**for some productive work in bringing the Good News of God to this sorry world**. That bears repeating.

Every baptized Christian has a role to play—a job to do—in bringing the Gospel—the Good News of Jesus Christ—to those in their circle of influence.

St. Paul paints a picture of what this looks like in a faithful disciple when he writes:

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. (Phil 1:21-24)

St. Paul loved Jesus so much that he wanted to be in heaven...**right then!** But he loved the people he influenced so much that he was willing to delay his own eternity in order to bring others to come to know Jesus in the same way he had come to **know**...and **love** him.

When we now consider the two brides—the one who was **externally faithful**—but whose **bitterness** and **emptiness** is *betrayed* by her **gossip**; and the bride who disobeyed God initially, but who, after *being touched by the mercy of Jesus*, desired to make things right with him...

When we consider these two brides:

Which one is more likely to give a compelling witness to the generous mercy of Jesus to others?

Which one is more likely to display the Fruits of the Holy Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity and self-control?

The most productive laborer in doing the Lord's work is always the one who has first allowed his love and mercy to penetrate his or her heart.

When the landowner actively searched for workers in the marketplace, he found many of them **idle**...some of them standing around **all day long** doing *nothing*.

Whenever I hear this parable, I think of day laborers in the **Home Depot** parking lot waiting for someone to drive up and offer them work. Once when I was driving our parish maintenance truck by a Home Depot, I thought some of the workers might actually jump in the truck bed, so eager were they to **do something productive** to earn some money.

And I wasn't even hiring!

In the parable, the words “**idle**” and “**marketplace**” are key for our own examination of conscience—to see if we are as eager to carry out **God's work**—as the day laborers in the Home Depot parking lot are to do **any work**.

The origins of the word “idle”—that’s i-d-l-e—are: **empty, useless, vain, frivolous and worthless.**

The idle workers in the parable were standing around in the “**marketplace**”. What happens in a marketplace? **Entertainment and consumption.**

The spiritual idleness of today is fueled, in large part, by indulgence in empty, useless, vain, frivolous, worthless entertainment and consumerism. How much of our daily activity is spent in this way?

If we spend **several—or many—hours** a day looking at the screen on our **phone, tablet, gaming device or computer** and less than *five minutes* a day in prayer, what are the chances we’re even going to be *thinking* of using the talents and abilities that God has given us to bring his joy and peace to **others...**not to mention *ourselves*?

If we try to satisfy our empty, lonely sad hearts by *buying more stuff* that we **don’t need** and that **can’t satisfy**, instead of bringing our emptiness, loneliness and sadness to Jesus to heal with his generous mercy, *what will we have to offer others who have the same empty hearts, when we have not allowed our own hearts to be touched and healed?*

In **John’s Gospel**, Jesus said:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing... By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. (Jn 15:4-5, 8)

A **fruitless, unproductive** life may be easier in the short term, because it requires no **exertion**. But it will leave us **empty and miserable in the long run.**

A **fruitful** life, touched by *Jesus*, and dedicated to bringing his **generous love and mercy** to others, certainly takes more *effort*. **But the compensation is...out of this world!**

Some people on the street hold cardboard signs that say, “**Will work for food.**”

The life of a *loved, forgiven and redeemed* sinner, is, itself, a sign that proclaims to the world: **Will work for happiness and joy...yours...and mine!** The kind of joy that can *only* be found in from a relationship with **Jesus...**who *seeks us out...*to offer it to us. The choice to accept...well, that’s up to each person.