

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year A September 21, 2014

Theme: A Living Wage

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Wow, wouldn't the **National Labor Relations Board**, the **AFL-CIO** and the **Allied Grape Growers of America** all have a field day with this parable!

It's probably the most disliked of Jesus parables because he **offends just about everyone**: labor and management, Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, capitalists and socialists.

All this even though he began by saying the parable was about the **Kingdom of God** and ended with the owner noting it was about **generosity not fairness**.

And yet most of us come away from Jesus' teaching **sympathizing with the workers hired early in the morning** who received exactly what those who worked on one hour were paid.

Somehow it just **doesn't seem fair**, despite the fact those early workers received what they had agreed upfront was just payment for their labor.

The generosity of the owner in giving all the workers a day's wage even when they may have worked only 6 or 4 or even 1 hour smacks up against **hard fought labor-management battles** of the past century.

Jesus, however, saw this parable as an **apt illustration** of how God's own generosity is at work among us:

God's mercy comes to us all – whether early or late – as a **free, unearned and unmerited gift**.

God reaches out to us in love and freely gives what we need – just as the workers in the parable all needed a job to feed their families.

Generously, the owner gave the workers a daily wage even though they had not worked all day: why, because they needed to feed themselves and their families.

God give us the grace of the Spirit and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – not because we have earned them or deserve them, but **because we need them**.

The behavior of the owner in the parable opens for **moral reflection** a number of current social issues, not the least of which are **the minimum wage and a living wage**.

The **Federal minimum wage** – currently \$7.25 -- is the lowest amount an employer may pay a worker, though a number of states have recently been raising this amount on their own.

The West Virginia Legislature increased the minimum here by a paltry \$1.50 over the next two years.

Here's how **our US Catholic Bishops** some years ago defined a living wage:

“By the term living wage we understand a wage sufficient not merely for the decent support of the workingman himself but also of his family. A wage so low that it must be supplemented by the wage of wife and mother or by the children of the family before it can provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter together with essential spiritual and cultural needs cannot be regarded as a living wage. Furthermore, a living wage means sufficient income to meet not merely the present necessities of life but those of unemployment, sickness, death, and old age as well.”

That statement was written way back in 1940; our bishops along with our Popes in their encyclicals on social justice have long taught that a living wage for workers is demanded by the dignity of the human person.

And yet **the disparity**, even in our country, between the minimum wage and a living wage remains.

Dr. Amy Glasmeier at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has studied this issue and developed a way to calculate the living wage in specific areas of the country.

I've copied her calculations for Hancock County in the bulletin this week: while the hourly minimum wage here is \$7.25, the living wage for a family of two adult and two children to live here is actually a full ten dollars higher, at \$17.24.

Dr. Glasmeier wrote: *"The minimum wage does not provide a living wage for most American families. A typical family of four (two working adults, two children) needs to work more than 3 full-time minimum-wage jobs (a 68-hour work week per working adult) to earn a living wage."*

That's 68 hour every week at minimum wage for both parents to be able to earn a living wage.

There are various national campaigns underway among workers to secure an actual living wage: perhaps you have seen stories about this in the paper, for hospital laundry, cleaning and clerical staffs, for fast food restaurants workers, and others.

Many of these campaigns point out the disparity between the minimum wages they are paid and the exorbitant salary/benefit packages the chief operating officers of their parent corporations are given.

Obviously, a living wage would have serious implications for our economy as well as implications for our society, something that managers and business owners would have to struggle to implement.

Yet, Catholic social teaching from our bishops and popes for more than 125 years now indicates that a living wage is an important part of social justice and a reflection of the Kingdom of God.

We who long for the coming of the Kingdom of God seek to make that Kingdom present here and now.

Perhaps we cannot bring about a living wage anytime soon,

...yet the more we talk about it,
...the more we bring it to the attention of others,
...the more reflect on those who must struggle day by day to
feed their families while making much less than that living
wage,

...the more we hasten the coming of that Kingdom.

And maybe instead of feeling so sorry for the workers who got paid
exactly what they agreed to work for,

...we could just feel a smidgen of joy for the workers who hadn't
been able to find a job all day but came across an owner who
generously gave them a full day's pay!