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One of my friends likes to quote her mother's debate-stopping dictum: "I've thought about it, and I'm right." While we may laugh at that, at least half of our laughter comes from recognizing our own silly pretensions to infallibility in her pronouncement. Today's reading from Isaiah offers a warning about our aspirations to certitude, especially when it comes to things of God.

Isaiah begins with a demand: "Seek the Lord while he may be found!" This assumes that God is not at our beck and call. No matter how beautiful the temple or tabernacle, we can't imprison God in human constructs or institutions.

Isaiah quotes God as saying, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways." There's probably no sincere believer who would claim to understand God. But, we should still ask ourselves how often we expect God to act on our agenda and obey our rules.

The fact that God doesn't meet human expectations lies underneath many of the attempts to prove that a good God does not exist. Although it may be unconscious, the person who denies God's existence based on a particular set of circumstances, is working from their own definition of God and their perception of how God should act.

A more honest statement than “God cannot exist” would be “I can’t imagine how God could exist under these circumstances.” To that, Isaiah would respond, “You got it! God’s thoughts are not your thoughts.”

Remember, Jesus used stories to throw the listeners off-balance. The parables were specifically designed to help folks trip over their own self-righteousness, to remind them of God’s sovereign freedom.

In close competition with the story of the prodigal son, who never had to pay for his misdeeds, today’s parable about the landowner who paid his workers equally for unequal work is one of the most disconcerting, if not infuriating, of Jesus’ tales. People from vastly different cultures and historical eras tend to agree about these two stories: “It’s not fair!”

Isaiah told us that God says, “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my thoughts above your thoughts.” At least one thing that should teach us is that God doesn’t see things from our perspective.

Jesus used this parable to provide some hints about God’s perspective. He begins with a landowner — later referred to as the lord — whose vineyard needed work done, and there were people who needed a job for the day. As the day went on, it became obvious that the field work was not as important to the owner as were the laborers.

Each time he returned, he found more workers waiting to be hired, and each time he hired them, promising them a just wage. As the day was waning, he found still more guys waiting in the labor line, and he asked them directly why they had been idle all day. Their answer: “It wasn’t our choice. Nobody gave us a job.” What they didn’t add, but what anyone who ever stood in their position knows, is that “Nobody hired us,” also meant, “After being here all day, we’ve still got nothing with which to buy food for our children.”

The question lurking underneath this parable is, “What is just?” The disgruntled workers, who were fortunate enough to spend the whole day employed and certain that they and their families would eat that day, ended up thinking that they deserved more than others. It never occurred to them that they had already gotten it. Apparently, the lord thought that justice had more to do with what someone needs to survive than with the luck of landing a good job.

Nearly 2,000 years after Jesus shared this parable, St. John Paul II applied its principles to conditions of the third millennium. He said: “The globalized economy must be analyzed in the light of the principles of social justice, respecting the preferential option for the poor who must be allowed to take their place in such an economy” (“The Church in America,” #55). Today’s vineyard is a globalized economy which means that the demands of justice and responsibility for the common good now know no national, ethnic or religious boundaries.

Seeing things from the perspective of the vineyard owner, John Paul II teaches that in that world-wide economy, human needs trump profits. He went on to say: “the goal of the Church is to assure that no one is marginalized” (#58). That is quite a different perspective than one which, for whatever reason, asserts “I deserve more than those others!”

God’s ways are not our ways. Think about it. Isaiah got it right.

### **ISAIAH 55:6-9**

Scholars look at Chapter 55 as the hinge between the second and third major divisions of the Book of Isaiah. It reaches back into what has gone before and introduces the final section. The introduction (Isaiah 55:1-5), is the wide-open invitation to enjoy the fruits of wisdom, God’s free offering to any who are hungry and thirsty for the life God offers. That invitation is followed by a short section far more imperative in tone.

“Seek the Lord while he may be found!” At least in part, this is a reminder that no matter how beautiful the temples and tabernacles we build, we can’t domesticate God. God will not be confined to a place to which we may go, just because we decide we want divine counsel or help ready at hand. The God of Israel, the God of Jesus, decides when and where, how and to whom to be present. Human attempts to circumscribe God’s presence are the gateway to idolatry, the worship of a god created in our imagination. Thus, Isaiah warns us: “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near.” God’s people are made to be seekers, not trappers.

The second part of this reading carries that idea forward, underlining the fact that we always need to seek the ways of God rather than assume we know them. “My thoughts are not your thoughts...” God is not answerable to our agenda, not circumscribed by our dogma, not limited to our language. When Isaiah quotes God

as saying, “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways,” the intent is not to denigrate human wisdom or to say that inspiration is impossible. The point is the very simple and hard to accept fact that we are not God.

### **PHILIPPIANS 1:20c-24, 27a**

Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians while he was imprisoned, sometime between the years 57 and 63 C.E. (Scholarly opinion puts Paul’s death around the year 67.) In Philippians, Paul reveals his personal feelings about his own life and about his love for the members of his community. Underlying it all, Paul wants to convey his complete trust in Christ and the joy he knows because of that faith.

When he first refers to his imprisonment, Paul explains that his misfortune has turned out as an advantage for the Gospel. His willing suffering has engendered courage in others who continue to preach (Philippians 1:12-14). Paul is concerned that the Philippians have allowed his situation to discourage or intimidate them. Thus, in the opening section of this letter, he makes every effort to encourage them, to entice them into sharing the joy he experiences even in, or perhaps even because of, his dire circumstances. Paul’s way of approaching his unknown future is the context through which to understand the selection we hear today.

When we are privileged to hear the reflections of someone facing death we get a glimpse of what life itself means to them as well as what they believe about their future beyond the grave. The first thing Paul says in this regard is, “For to me life is Christ.” Life in Christ, or Christ’s life in him, is a reality that Paul has discovered and cultivated ever since he met Christ on the road to Damascus.

With his conversion and the impassioned preaching life that followed it, Paul came to have but one single purpose in life, yet, it pulled him in two directions. We might say that Paul was both a mystic and a missionary. From the mystical point of view, he was convinced that death is gain. Death would bring him into a new, unfettered union with Christ. That was the goal of his life and longing.

On the other hand, empowered by Christ’s life within him, he was inexhaustibly and persistently missionary. There seemed to be nothing more satisfying to him than spending himself in preaching the Gospel — no matter what the circumstances.

As Paul works through explaining this to the Philippian community, we see him weighing the possibilities and coming to what a Jesuit might call Ignatian indifference. In this process, we get a glimpse of one set of concrete circumstances that grounded his conviction that “all things work for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). To live was to increase the awareness of Christ in the world; to die was to experience the fullness of union for which he longed and toward which every activity of his life was aimed.

Today’s selection from Philippians is inspiring. If we are willing to go beyond admiration for Paul and his zeal, it invites us to reflect on our lives as he did on his. Consider how we might fill in the blanks if we had a paper in front of us that read: “For me to live is \_\_\_ and death is \_\_\_.” Paul had risked his life for the mission, so the answer may have been pretty clear to him. Our own responses will help us see how the circumstances of our lives lead us to God and to reflect on where it is we want to go.

### **MATTHEW 20:1-16a**

Did it ever occur to you that the vineyard owner in this parable could have saved a lot of hard feelings had he simply paid the longest-working laborers first? After 12 hours of toil, they probably wouldn’t have hung around to see what the others were going to get paid. But, then Jesus wouldn’t have had a maddening story. So, we should probably ask what he wanted to teach us.

This parable followed on Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man who wanted to gain eternal life, but couldn’t bring himself to give away his wealth in order to do so. One wonders if that sad man ever figured out that the only way to the kingdom of heaven was to care at least as much about others as he did about himself (Matthew 19:16-30).

Right after the incident with that man, Jesus told this story about how things are in the kingdom of heaven and how God can be compared to a wealthy landowner. The setup leads us to two questions: “What kind of a landowner is God, and who would be happy to work in his vineyard?”

The landowner Jesus depicts is persistent. He himself goes out at dawn to find people who need the work he has to offer. He returns to the labor market four more times. It seems, as if, the primary focus of his day is on finding workers: he goes

looking before and after breakfast, before and after lunch, and finally just before supper time. Finding his workers seemed to be more important than eating! By early afternoon, any observer would have been catching on to the fact that this master had a great deal more interest in employing the people than in the amount of work they could accomplish.

The owner who kept going out must have understood that, with each successive trip, he was apt to find less and less desirable workers. His dawn-hires were probably the men who appeared to be the strongest, the ones who got up extra early and could well have been hired by others, if not by him. As the day wore on, the workers still waiting were the consistently unchosen. Perhaps, they had been from market to market hoping to be found, but to no avail. Everything points to the fact that for this master, the workers mattered more than the work.

That leads to the second question. Who wants to be in this master's employ? The early birds had no complaints at the moment of their hire. The situation was uninspiringly normal. They went to the labor market that day and got a job right away "for the usual daily wage." Unlike the late-hires, they didn't have to endure hours of worry speculating where they should go next, wondering whether or not they would get a job — if not today, perhaps tomorrow? Each time the owner returned to the market, the people he encountered were a little more anxious, and therefore, a little more grateful when he hired them. Those who had waited the longest were surely the most thrilled at finally being chosen. Conversely, as people stood in the pay line, with each group that received the same wage there was growing disillusionment and discontent at the back of the line.

The parable doesn't canonize any of the workers, although it surely suggests that some ended up far more grateful to the owner and far more willing to work for him again. What's the parable really about? Just what Isaiah said, "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are God's ways above ours." We all hope for justice. The question from whose perspective do we understand it?

## **Planning: 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings again present us with strong reminders that the ways of the Lord are often quite different from the ways of human societies, including our own. The first reading says it explicitly: "For my

thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.” The Gospel parable offers us a clear example of that truth. Many parishioners, hearing that parable, are inclined to agree with the workers who complain about the master’s generosity. Those who worked all day *should* get more pay than those who only worked an hour, right? The parable reminds us that God works with different principles than our capitalist society.

We often think of situations in our world beyond the church walls when this contrast is drawn. We recognize that there are countless situations where the values of the Gospel hold little sway in the worlds of work and finance, in politics and entertainment, and in many other areas.

It might be interesting and productive for planners to spend some time asking what principles guide our life *inside* church walls, both in worship and in other parish activities. Are we really living by the Gospel or do we often operate in the same manner as those in business or politics?

In our worship, are all people truly welcomed and treated equally? Do those who give a lot in the collection get special consideration in any way? Do the poor really feel welcome, even if much of the assembly is well-off? Are those with various physical or mental disabilities fully integrated into the worshipping assembly and into the various ministries as they are able? Are people from different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds welcomed into the worship and the ministries? Are women and men both broadly represented in the liturgical ministries that do not require ordination? How well are young people integrated into liturgical or parish ministries?

What about the parish liturgy committee and whatever group is responsible for planning worship? Are those groups representative of all the various sectors of the community?

Are there divisions within the community? Do these show up even in the celebration of the Eucharist? What can you do to heal such rifts? How can you foster forgiveness and reconciliation?

In the preaching and prayers this weekend, keep the difference between God’s ways and human ways in mind. Invite people to embrace the ways of God, even when they seem so contrary to what we take for granted in society. Pray for the strength to embrace God’s ways both in church and throughout our lives

## **Prayers: 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Today’s readings remind us that with God, we are wise to expect the unexpected. Life is full of surprises and, sometimes, reversals: We may suffer injustice; things may seem unfair or out of balance; bad things happen when we least expect them. But whatever happens to us, we can be confident that God is with us. Even more, a

loving, generous God is actually pursuing us. God's love and compassion are always here...though sometimes just outside our line of vision. And sometimes that love and compassion may be expressed in ways beyond our comprehension. Realizing that can help us to see everything—and everyone-- differently. Nothing is as it seems.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you taught the disciples that God's generosity is not like our own: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you show us that God's love is offered to everyone: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to live with generous, boundless love: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray now, brothers and sisters, for our own needs and those of one another.

**Minister** For the whole church: That we may be a loving community open to everyone...we pray,

- For national policies that exhibit justice and generosity for all, especially the poor and disenfranchised...we pray,
- For those who have never experienced the generosity of others...we pray,
- For those who feel unworthy of God's love and generosity...we pray,
- For those who believe that others must earn respect, kindness or generosity...we pray,
- For those who do not know how to show boundless love to others...we pray,
- For our Jewish brothers and sisters who this week are celebrating their most solemn Feast of Atonement, Yom Kippur...we pray,
- For all in this community who are in special need of love and compassion, especially the sick, the dying and the grieving...we pray,

**Presider** Gracious God, you show us that there is more to life than we can ever imagine. Our vision, expectations, and actions are often narrow and limited. Help us to see with your eyes and treat one another with your love and generosity. We ask this in the name of your beloved son, Jesus. Amen.

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