

Job 1:1-11, 16-18

Psalm 8:1b, 3-4; 5-6; 7-8 *R: How beautiful is your Name through all the earth.*

Romans 12:14-18

Matthew 20:1-16

Entitlement is Not a Gospel Value

October 10, 2008 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Every culture has attitudes and beliefs about entitlement. Ours is no exception. Our culture practices so many forms of entitlement that often we are unconscious of them and their implications for others. A few examples: Some lawyers and doctors believe they are entitled to make large incomes and acquire significant wealth because they went to school longer, have power over cultural systems, sometimes power over life and death. Some business people believe they are entitled to make as much money as possible for themselves, regardless of the impact on others, the national economy, or the impact of our economy on world markets. A young woman I admire very much in many ways recently told me that her choice of presidential candidates depends entirely on which candidate will lower her taxes and improve her income; she feels entitled to consider no interest but her own when she votes. Some clergy believe they are entitled to a life-style of privilege, wealth, and power over others. Some heterosexuals believe they are entitled to marriage [even marriages!] and its benefits, but homosexuals are not. Some people who are white feel entitled to positions of leadership and economic benefits to which people who are not white are not entitled. Some males believe they are entitled to make all important decisions and to make more money than women who do the same work. Many US citizens believe they are entitled to avoid or evade taxation, because they create jobs for others or keep the economy going or because their desires or needs take precedence over those of people less fortunate. Indeed, this is such a common attitude of entitlement that the Treasury Department recently reported an estimated 400 billion dollars in unpaid taxes annually. Given the \$700 billion bail-out, tax evasion takes on new meaning. Some people believe that 16% of the world's population [US, Europe and Japan] are entitled to use 80% of the world's resources, despite the implications for billions of other people.

Each of these is an example of an attitude/belief of entitlement based on self-interest. Jesus' culture had its attitudes and beliefs of entitlement. One can argue that Jesus devoted his entire ministry to challenging attitudes and beliefs about entitlement based on self-interest. Jesus speaks to some of those in today's gospel and the stories that precede it.

Despite its images, today's parable is not about workers, worker rights, or worker justice. The vineyard is God's kin-dom. The vineyard owner is God. The workers in the vineyard are those God calls to tend the kin-dom. Some work long hours, under extreme

conditions and suffer. Others receive God's invitation, or respond it, late in the game. They work short hours, under better conditions, suffer less or not at all. Jesus tells this parable to the disciples to challenge their attitude of entitlement about their anticipated reward.

In the sermon of chapter 18, Jesus taught the disciples they are not entitled to judge, but required to forgive - endlessly. In the stories that follow, preceding today's parable, the disciples observe and listen as Jesus encounters Pharisees who question him about divorce, children who want Jesus' attention, and a rich man who wants to know how to gain eternal life. Each encounter provokes the disciples to question Jesus based on their assumptions of entitlement. They assume men are entitled to divorce their wives and women are not entitled to divorce their husbands. If a man can't divorce his wife, why get married! They assume adults are entitled to ignore children. They assume those who observe the law are entitled to eternal life. If a holy, rich man [who alone could observe the whole law] can't be saved, who can? They assume they are entitled to something because they are disciples; they gave up everything to follow Jesus. What do they get in return, they ask.

In each case, Jesus disabuses them of their notions of entitlement. In relationships like marriage, there must be mutuality. Children merit access to, and attention and affection from, adults. Observing the law isn't enough to gain eternal life, especially for a rich person. The disciples may sit on figurative thrones in God's kin-dom, but they have no special privilege except the privilege of service. Instead, the first will be last, and the last will be first.

When it comes to entering God's kin-dom, divine love takes precedence over justice. Being a life-long disciple, even one who sacrifices much and suffers greatly, being an important disciple - even a Pope - does not entitle him or her to more than any other disciple. In God's kin-dom, all who enter receive the same reward.

Painful as it is to contemplate, shocking as it is to our cultural sensibilities, entitlement based on self-interest is not a gospel value. The rich man understood that. He walked away grieving. The last will be first and the first will be last.