

October 4, 2020

St. Augustine/Crowley Center 11:30 a.m.

### **Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time/Respect Life Sunday**

As we gather together on this 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year in our Liturgical Calendar, and the first Sunday in October in our civic calendar, we continue to find ourselves in the grip of this worldwide pandemic that is unprecedented in any of our lifetimes, or according to any calendar of any kind. As much as we all want to be free of this pandemic and return to normal, the shocking news that we all learned very early Friday morning that the President and First Lady, along with a number of other people in the President's inner circle, had tested positive for COVID-19, makes us all realize that we are far from being free of this pandemic's hold on us and our world.

As we pray for the President, and all those suffering from this insidious virus, and certainly pray for all those brave health care workers caring for them, as well as for the scientists and researchers working to find the appropriate vaccines to keep us all safe and to finally defeat this virus, we realize with even greater awareness that we all need to keep taking the necessary precautions to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe and well.

We've all probably done a lot of reflecting about this rather bizarre year of 2020, in particular how everything that's taken place has affected us, and our society, and what lasting impacts this will have on our world. When reflecting, some may find it helpful to sit quietly and meditate; others might want to write down their thoughts in a journal; those who are more creative might want to write a poem or compose a song about these strange and challenging times in which we are living.

That's what we heard Isaiah doing in today's First Reading. As a Prophet of God, Isaiah had been charged by God with encouraging the People of Israel to live in God's ways; and when they had gone astray, then he needed to remind them to turn from their sinful ways and return to the Lord. But when they had gone really far afield from how they should be living, Isaiah, upon greater reflection, resorted to singing them a Song, as we heard in today's First Reading, appealing to their hearts to recognize their sins and change their ways. And so Isaiah's "song" was about his "Friend" ---Who of course was God. And this "Friend" had a Vineyard (which of course was Israel). And this "Friend" had done everything possible to make the vineyard productive in every way. But when it came to

harvest time, instead of the delicious grapes He hoped for, He got “wild/sour grapes”. And so, Isaiah’s “Friend” (that is, God) sang this sad line, asking: “*What more was there for Me to do for My vineyard that I had not done?*” That sad song comes from the depths of God’s discouraged Heart as He concludes: “*I looked for good grapes--- for Justice; but see, I got a useless harvest of bloodshed, outcries.*”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus clearly borrowed that “Song” from Isaiah, and told His own version of that same Story in a Parable about the Vineyard Owner. Jesus used a lot of the same elements, but the outcome was much more than that the Owner was disappointed in the people’s disobedience. In Jesus’ version, there was not just disobedience, but violence, death and destruction. Jesus’ Parable is really a summary of all of Salvation History---beginning with the Original Sin committed by our first parents, followed quickly by their son Cain killing his brother Abel, the first violent act in human history; and it continued from there throughout the rest of the Old Testament with the accounts of many of the Prophets of Old being killed, and going up to and including Jesus Himself---the Son of God Who had come to bring salvation, but, Who would very soon be rejected, treated with violence, and killed by the very people He had come to help.

At the end of this violent and upsetting Parable, Jesus asked the chief priests and the elders: “*What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?*” Their answer was predictable and very human. The blatant defiance of the Tenants toward the Owner in refusing to give him what was rightfully his; then the heinous ways they treated the Owner’s representatives that he sent in His Name; and finally the sheer madness and act of violence done to the Owner’s own Son---to kill him, followed by using absolutely delusional and distorted reasoning to think that somehow or another, that act of violence would enable them to get the Son’s inheritance.....The chief priests and elders were outraged at the extreme violence of the Tenants in Jesus’ parable. And yet their solution was just as violent: “*The owner should put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times.*” Their answer reflected the mentality of the day: “an eye for an eye”. Their solution to such evil and violence was to perpetuate the cycle of more evil and greater violence. And to be fair, that might very well be the answer that many of us might give as well, don’t you think?

But, they were wrong; and we too would be wrong. Jesus’ answer was as different as night from day; it’s the difference between death and Life. Jesus

came to initiate a completely new approach; or perhaps a better way to say it is that Jesus came to re-mind people about God's original Plan. God had originally created all people to live together in harmony and in peace....but then, Sin entered the world, which disrupted God's Plan. So, Jesus came to restore God's Plan, and to show us how we are to live in Peace, how to see one another as God sees us---as sisters and brothers in Christ; as sons and daughters of Our Father God.

Jesus would have no part in promoting a "wretched end". Jesus was all about a "brand new beginning". Jesus is the One to produce the "Good Grapes" that God intended by becoming the *"stone that the builders rejected, but which has become the cornerstone that is...wonderful in our eyes."* Jesus has come not to destroy, nor to retaliate; Jesus has come to restore and to transform.

It's not just a coincidence---in fact, it's providential---that we celebrate this 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time this year on October 4<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, and also on "Respect Life Sunday". What does Respect Life mean? Our basic catechism classes taught us about Respect. It is rooted in the fact that God made us with our ultimate purpose being to come to know God, love God, and serve God in this life, and eventually to be happy with God forever in Heaven. And so, we are to both love and respect God, s in the image of today's Parable, God is the "Owner" and the "Tenants" should have respected the Owner. We also know from our basic catechism classes about God's precious gift of Life. God made every human being in His image and likeness, and therefore, every human life is valuable and worthy of basic respect, from the first moment of conception until the final moment of human breath in the body, before passing from this world into the Life of the world to come.

And so, one of our most basic responsibilities as followers of Jesus is to Respect Life. We need to keep reminding ourselves who we are. Yes, we are valued and loved by God; but we must remember: we are the tenants and not the Owner. We also need to remember that we will need to make an accounting to God at the end of our lives. The theme for this year's Respect Life month of October is "Live the Gospel of Life", which acknowledges Pope St. John Paul II's powerful Encyclical on Life that he issued 25 years ago with that same title: *"Evangelium Vitae" (The Gospel of Life)*. It's truly a sad statement of fact to admit that our society has moved so far away from that Gospel mandate, as we see an increasing disrespect for human life at every level of the world in which we live.

The Parable that Jesus told, as shocking as it is in its degree of violence and disregard for the value of human life, is not too far away from the reality of the lived experience of this bizarre year of 2020 as evidenced in the widespread social unrest and violent clashes between one another in so many places in our country. While we rightly fear and take every precaution possible against this insidious and vicious COVID-19 Virus which infects and kills whoever it can, we should also be extremely anxious, and rightly fear, the awful “virus” that is infecting more and more of our society which treats the precious gift of human life with such disdain, disregard, and violence.

Just like the Tenants whose distorted and delusional thinking made them believe that their acts of violence could win them the son’s inheritance, our own “modern thinking” has become just as delusional and distorted by thinking that we have somehow become “God” who can determine when and for whom life begins, and when and how life ends.

Thankfully, God does not deal with us the way we tend to think we should treat one another; God will not decide to bring us to a “wretched end” and throw us out of the Vineyard. No, our God treats us with His limitless offer to repent of our sins, to change our distorted thinking, and to avail ourselves of God’s mercy, so that we can live again according to God’s ways.

As Pope Francis wrote in his new Encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” (Brothers and Sisters All) issued just today in Assisi, “*God our Father has created every human being with equal sanctity and dignity, equal rights and duties, and our Creator calls us to form a single human family in which we live as brothers and sisters.*” He continued: “*God’s plan for humanity has implications for every aspect of our lives--from how we treat one another in our personal relationships, to how we organize and operate our societies and economies.*”

In the beautiful words of St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians in today’s Second Reading, “*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious....THINK about these things! Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. THEN, the God of peace will be with you.*”

Let us imitate the humble and beloved St. Francis of Assisi, who found the way to true greatness by serving the needs of all. Let us be instruments of God’s Peace in the ways we treat one another with respect, valuing each human life and

treating every person with dignity, loving one another in Christ, Who has reconciled the world to Himself.

In our more reflective moments during these ongoing days of the pandemic, and in these times of great social unrest, when we ask ourselves what this all means for me, and for you, let's pray that the Song we compose can be a true *love ballad* that begins and ends with Jesus, Who has come not to bring us to a wretched end, but Who loves us in spite of our sins, invites us to start anew, and leads us into Life that never ends.