

Reflection-9/24/2017- by Cathy Dempsey
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 55:6-9; Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a; Matthew 20:1-16a)

“Comparing yourself to others is a bottomless pit in a swamp in a quagmire,” I have to tell myself probably half a dozen times a day.

God has helped me with that over the years a little bit, if I remember to stop and listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit saying: “Don’t go there, Cathy.” All too often, though, I still jump right into the swamp whenever I think somebody else is getting better treatment than me even though I “know” I’m more deserving than the other person.

I remember years ago I had a case with a lawyer on the opposing side where the case was complex, with a lot of different issues, lots of court hearings on smaller issues before we ever got to the main final trial, and the case was dragging on for a long time. The lawyer on the other side was driving me crazy. She was always at least half an hour late for court hearings, never returned phone calls, never responded to e-mails, was outrageously slow in responding to discovery requests I sent her. I always took great pride in being early for court, and responding promptly to communications from the other side in all my cases. This opposing lawyer was acting in a way that I judged to be extremely unprofessional, and of course, I had to complain at great length about her to the other lawyers in our office, and also anyone else on our staff who would listen to me. Everyone in the office was very sympathetic and agreed how badly the opposing attorney was behaving.

Then one day, when we were about two years into this case, one of the other lawyers in my office called me and said: “So Cathy, did you hear that Attorney So-And-So (the opposing lawyer on this case) just got the Such-and-Such Award,”—some kind of award for great work as an attorney. I thought I was going to pass out. I had to go outside and take a walk around the block. I’m not sure I was able to concentrate on anything else for the rest of the day.

Now, it’s not as if I was in the running for the award, and I lost out to her. It’s just the very thought that this person who I deemed “unworthy” had received this great honor, and it made me... angry. Fortunately, I’ve gotten over that now, and it doesn’t bother me at all. (By the way, if you believe that, you can see me after Mass in the vestibule, because I’ve got this great bridge in Brooklyn I’d like to sell you).

Today’s Gospel tells us that this way of relating to other people—judging what they deserve versus what we think we deserve—is just all wrong. We put so much energy into figuring out exactly how much and what kind of reward we deserve from God depending on what hour of the day we judge ourselves to have started work. We may think that we’ve behaved very well and obeyed God’s laws and done great work for God (that is, we’re like the field workers who started at dawn). On the other hand, we might judge ourselves to be horrible, sinful people, thus thinking we’re like the workers who came on at the end of the day, not deserving much at all. We look at other people and think about how that one is so

much worse than us, or this person is a little bit better than us, or just about the same as us, and we try to figure out what's "fair" in terms of compensation.

In the end, all of our mental calculations are wasted effort. Isaiah tells us today that God's ways are not our ways—God does not think the way we think. Isaiah tells us God is generous with mercy. God, the vineyard owner in the Gospel, challenges us: "Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?"

Our fundamental problem as humans is that we forget that God is infinite love and mercy. As humans we are limited, so we have a hard time wrapping our minds around the notion that God is not. God offers us—all of us—unlimited, boundless mercy, love, and forgiveness. There is plenty to go around. More for you doesn't mean less for me. And we don't have to earn it—in fact, we can't earn it. God's infinite, unlimited mercy, love, and forgiveness were there before we even came into existence—these are what brought us into existence in the first place. Our job as people, is simply to say "Yes" to that love, and to allow that love to permeate our lives and to flow out to other people, and to all creation. We don't have to measure out exactly how much each person gets. God is generous—there's always more where that came from.