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Isaiah 55:6-9
Philippians 1:20c-24, 27
Matthew 20:1-16a

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
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In middle school and high school, one of the greatest divides between kids happens in gym class. For some, it's the highlight of the day, but for others it's pure torture. If you were one of the kids who was the last resort choice for a team, or if you have a kid who always got picked last, you know the humiliation and anxiety is traumatizing.

Oliver Foit was one of the kids for whom gym class was fine; he was a popular 4-sport athlete at Roy High School in Salt Lake City. Earlier this year he shared an Instagram story about his freshman year PE class. The teacher had chosen him to be one of the captains to pick teams for basketball. In his words, "I remember I was getting ready to make my pick, and I was standing up in front of everyone. . . [and] I saw this girl . . . sitting in the back . . . and she usually got picked last. She was a little bit heavier set, wasn't really super coordinated, wasn't really into sports [For some reason] I called her name, and I remember she looked up and asked, 'Me?' And . . . she whispered something in my ear that I'll never forget. She leaned over and said, 'Are you sure?' And it kind of hit me. I looked over at her, and I said, 'Absolutely.'"

What kind of choice was that? Competition is about winning, right? Pick the best first, right? But Foit's choice paid off, because his approach took root and people bought in, and the class became an education in inclusion.

Fast forward to graduation. After the ceremony, the girl from gym class four years earlier found him, pulled him aside, and said, "Oliver, I still remember when you picked me first when we played basketball in ninth grade. That was the only time I was picked first for anything in school."

Looking back now a few years later, Foit said, "That gym class was one of the [best] classes I've ever had in my life. Because . . . it wasn't about trying to prove something It was . . . about . . . including people"

Oliver's story went viral because it's the exception to the rule. People saw themselves or someone they love in the girl who never got picked first! It offers an all-too-rare glimpse of inclusion in a world determined to rank us and value us based on our skills and abilities, and then reward us accordingly.

Today's gospel tells a similar story, but I'm not sure about you, but it doesn't evoke the same feel-good, heartwarming emotion as Oliver's PE story.

The landowner went out at four different times during the day—9, noon, 3, 5—to hire workers. All the workers got paid the amount they agreed on, but they all got paid the same amount! Whether they'd worked 8 hours or just 1 hour, they all made the same! The people who provided the least benefit to the operation got paid as much as the people who provided the most!

The workers who'd worked the whole day complained, “[Y]ou have made them equal to us.” And if we had spent all day working for the same amount as someone who worked only one hour, we'd probably feel the same way: How dare you make them equal to us. We worked harder! We're more valuable! We deserve more!

My first response to today's gospel probably wasn't “Wow, what a beautiful story about a landowner making sure everyone is taken care of,” but instead, “How's that fair to the people who worked more?”

Why is it that our heartstrings are tugged by the kids who always get picked last in PE, but our defenses immediately go up when it comes to hearing about preferential treatment for workers who get picked last? Why do we feel sympathy for the kid who gets left out but resentment for the worker who gets left out?

When it comes to the kid picked last, we don't sit and analyze all the reasons that caused her to be picked last—Was she lazy? Did she make bad health choices? Maybe she's abusing the system—pretending to be no good so that no one expected much.

But when it comes to workers and making money, we tend to make all kinds of assumptions. They must be lazy. They must have made bad life choices. They abused the system, showed up at the end, and got something they didn't deserve!

But, what do we *really* know about the workers who were picked last? At the time Jesus taught this parable, day workers would show up in the marketplace in

the morning looking for work, and employers would pick the workers they wanted, the strongest and most skilled. Others would be left waiting, unpicked. The weaker ones, the ones with fewer skills, and very often the older ones.

But they had families, too. They had bills. They had obligations. They had to eat.

Analyzing today's gospel, Dominican sister and theologian Barbara Reid posed this question: "If the landowner had given the laborers that were hired last anything other than one day's wage, what good would that do? How would they feed their children?"

She concludes that, "Justice, in God's reign . . . is about everybody being able to eat at the end of the day" [REPEAT FOR EFFECT]; "Justice, in God's reign . . . is about everybody being able to eat at the end of the day"; and she suggests that our defense reaction to this parable most likely lays in the fact that it "challenges those in privileged positions to examine their sense of entitlement." Ouch. That is an uncomfortable truth!

In his encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo wrote, "I consider particularly insidious the [ideology] that suggests that every person must earn or justify his or her own worth, to the point of attributing greater value to those who are more efficient or effective. . . . The value of persons . . . does not depend on what they achieve or produce. There are rights that apply to everyone simply by virtue of being human."

So today, let's ask, "Who's last? Who's least? Who's left out?" Who's hungry? Who's homeless? Who needs medical care? Who needs to be included?

And instead of falling into the trap of blaming them for their own condition, let's remember Pope Leo's words: "Human dignity does not depend on a person's abilities, wealth or position in life, nor on the right or wrong choices made; instead, it is a gift . . . endowed by God as an expression of [God's] unfailing love." And let's commit to making the changes that will ensure everyone is able to eat at the end of the day.