

27<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Harvest”  
Bishop Frank Schuster

Many years ago, when I was returning home from my studies in Chicago, about ten minutes into the flight, we all noticed something rather frightening. There was smoke filling the cabin. We were terrified. After all, smoke in the cabin is a bad thing. Soon the captain was on the intercom with a very calm and sedated voice, “Ladies and Gentlemen, as you are no doubt aware. There is a little smoke gathering in our main cabin. Now, it is probably nothing to be concerned about. Just to be 'on the safe side', we are going to return to O’Hare and switch planes.” We all felt the plane make skid marks in the air as it turned around. Everyone in the plane was stone cold. The couple I was sitting next to silently held hands tightly as we approached the airport. As we were approaching the runway, out my window I could see a train of fire engines and ambulances racing to meet us as we landed. As an aside, it is at this point in the story you may be tempted to ask, “Did you die?” Obviously, we made it just fine. A fried wire in the galley was the culprit causing the smoke. After we had landed, I began to process this experience with the couple sitting next to me. As we were taxiing to our gate, they asked me, “so what do you do for a living?” I smiled and said, “I’m a Catholic Priest”. They started to giggle. They thought that was funny.

I tell this story because there is something that happens when you survive life or death situations. During the ordeal, I was praying things like, “Lord please save us!” But things also started to rush through my head like, “Is this it? Am I ready?” Life or death situations remind us violently, like ice cold water splashing into our face, that we have no fundamental “right” to be alive. Everything we are and everything we have is ultimately a free gift from God. We may have worked long hard hours to get where we are, just as the tenants in the vineyard in the Gospel today who worked the farm. In the end, however, it did not matter how many hours or years the tenants put into maintaining the vineyard. The vineyard forever remains God's property.

You and I have been given the precious gift of life in this vineyard of God's creation. There are many terraces to this vineyard. Let me focus on just a few. First, we have the vineyard of “existence”. All of us have the same experience in that none of us chose to be born. There is nothing more basic than that. No one got to choose which home we are born into, which country, or the color of our skin or our gender. There wasn’t a computer for us to type in our preferences before we were conceived. These things were given to us without our asking for them. They are gifts that we have no right to. At some point in our early years, we reflect on questions like, “who am I, why am I here, what is my purpose”? We go through life searching for answers to these questions, like trying to decipher braille. However, if we are blessed, a light will shine in the darkness for us. As we get closer, we realize that this light is a person, and he even has a name. His name is Jesus. We discover that he is not just a name printed on a page or a historical idea gathering dust. We discover that he is the master of this vineyard called existence. If we are blessed, we will let him embrace us and answer the questions we have about who we are, why we are here, the fruit we are supposed to cultivate and where we are going. If we are unwise, we will reject him, like the tenants of the vineyard in our Gospel reading this weekend who foolishly believed that they were the masters of the vineyard.

Another terrace of this vineyard we all have been given is the environment. God gave us the earth where we can live, breath, cultivate and grow. As many of you know, Pope Francis gave us his sequel to Laudato Si this last week in his exhortation, Laudate Deum. In it he correctly points out, once again, that humanity is behaving like bad stewards of the vineyard we have been given which we call the environment. There are consequences to that as basic as the air we breathe, the food we eat, to how we treat millions of people who struggle to put food on the table in developing countries. We would all do well if we treated the environment as a gift from God to be cared for rather than exploited to the ruin of all. Pope Francis encourages us to do so and to take steps together to clean up our part of the vineyard.

A most important terrace of this vineyard is of course the Church. When both Isaiah and Jesus speak of the vineyard, they are referring to Israel. God is the farmer who did all the work to build the vineyard before leasing it out to the tenants. He gave us the prophets, the covenants, indeed, in the fullness of time he gave us his only Son, that those who believe in him will not die but might have eternal life. We are the grapes in the master's vineyard that he wants to preserve. The Church is the vineyard that we are to grow. Bishops, priests, and deacons have a special role in cultivating this garden as do religious, lay ecclesial ministers and indeed the whole People of God. If we follow Jesus in all things, we are doing our job. If we do not follow Jesus by proclaiming his Gospel in every age, we are no better than the tenants in our Gospel reading who say they want the kingdom but do not want God in it. As Archbishop Sartain repeatedly reminded the priests and deacons he ordained. Always remember that your homilies do not have the power to save anyone. Only Jesus has the words of eternal life. Therefore, our lives and our ministry need to always point to him. As the synod on synodality progresses in Rome this month, we join our Holy Father in his prayer that the Holy Spirit will be the protagonist. This is because the Holy Spirit, being one with the Father and the Son, will always point us to Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life.

However, sometimes it takes an earthquake in our lives before we understand that everything we have, everything we are, and everything we will be, is a gift from God that we have no right to. With any gift we are given, we can be good stewards of it or bad stewards of it. Both have consequences. For some, that moment happens in an airplane in the moment of an emergency landing. For some, it happens when you are wheeled into an operating room. There are moments in life we are cognizant that the only thing we really own at that moment is the hospital gown we are wearing, our hope in a competent surgeon, and our faith in a good and gracious God. For all of us, there will be a day when the master of the vineyard will come for the harvest. As we approach the table of the Lord today, we recommit ourselves to the vocation God has given us in this life as he offers himself to us once more in the harvest of his Body and Blood.