

Society of Jesus
New England Province
Homily for Jubilee Mass September 18, 2011

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First and foremost, I want to thank all of you who are here today, our family, friends, and brother Jesuits who through your love, your prayers, your patience and your undying support these many years have brought my brother jubilarians and me to this day. I am sure I speak for all of us celebrating our years of service -- without you, we could not have done it. And let me also take the opportunity at the outset to congratulate my fellow jubilarians of 2011. By my count, today we are celebrating 1,305 years of life in the Society of Jesus and 620 years of priestly service. That's a lot of years!

I am honored and I am humbled to be the preacher today, especially being one of the youngsters in the crowd at age 56. That's one of the nice things about being a Jesuit in this part of the world these days: until you are very old, you remain forever young. I take to heart the words of wisdom that Harry Cain shared with one of his younger brother Jesuits. About religious life in the Society Harry said, "the first fifty years are the hardest." That was meant to be encouraging, right Harry?

Over the last 35 years that I have been a Jesuit and the 25 years that I have been a priest I have heard it said more than once, and with great nostalgia, "You know, there just aren't any more characters in the New England Province. " Well, I ask you, look over the list of Jubilarians, picture each of us, and I think you'll have to agree, and I am sure that Myles would concur: Fear not, there still are characters in the New England Province. And not only do Jesuits tend to be characters, but we tend to be characters who are headstrong. Several years ago BC had its incoming first-year students read the novel *The Tender Bar* by J.R. Mohringer. The story is set in a neighborhood pub in Long Island. Mohringer describes the guys who gather there regularly as "a confraternity of alphas." When I read that line I said to myself, "Now

there's an apt description of Jesuit community – a confraternity of alphas.”

It is providential that the gospel of today, for the twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, presents us with the familiar proverb of workers in the vineyard. Isn't that what today's celebration is all about? Honoring workers in the vineyard. Each of us jubilarians, characters that we are, alpha males that we may indeed be, each of us has brought to our years of service our talents as well as our eccentricities, our perseverance as well as our peccadilloes, our strengths as well as our weaknesses. To extend the vineyard metaphor: One is gifted at tilling the soil to make it ready, another knows just how to plant the seeds in the right way; one has immeasurable patience while the vines grow at their own slow pace, another knows just how to feed and water the vines; one is skilled at pruning when pruning is needed, another has the ability to discern the climate so as to protect the vines, and yet another knows when it is time to call in the harvest. Each of us is a character in his unique way, but all of us are the same in this regard – we were called by God to labor with Jesus in the vineyard – and we said yes to that invitation 25 years ago, 35 years ago, 50 years ago, 60 years ago, 70 years ago, 75 years ago. And to paraphrase Stephen Sondheim from the legendary play *Follies*, “Good times and bad times, we've seen them all and, my dear, we're still here.” And through the good times and through the bad times, each of us would say, I am sure, “God has blessed me beyond all telling, in the blessings that are easy and obvious, as well as the blessings that are blessings in disguise.”

Back to today's parable. Recall that the landowner goes out to hire some men in his vineyard. He agrees to pay them one denarius for a day's work. A few hours later the landowner finds more men and only says “I will pay what is right.” A few more hours later the landowner finds more men and gives them work and then a few hours later he finds a few more and so on. At the end of the day when the landowner is paying everybody, he gives the workers he hired at the beginning of the day a denarius as he promised. Then he paid everybody else one denarius even if they worked for only an hour. Talk about unfair labor practices! But God's way of treating people goes beyond our conventional notions of

fairness, equity, reasonableness, and impartiality. As we ponder the meaning of this parable, we hear the words of our first reading from the prophet Isaiah: “my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,” says the Lord. “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts.” The Lord asks each of us the same question that the landlord asked the disgruntled worker, “Are you envious because I am generous?” Each of us knows from experience that envy, one of the deadliest of the deadly sins, a cancer of the soul, erodes our faith, undermines our zeal, and dissolves our communities. As with the parable of the prodigal son, the dutiful ones, steadfast and faithful, distance themselves from God and neighbor when they fall into the trap of resentment. God does not want us to be jealous of the success and good fortune of others. God wants us to count our blessings, not compare them. Haven’t we all known people who wallow in bitterness when they look at the greener grass on the other side of someone else’s fence. How self-centered it is when I cannot or will not celebrate the good fortune of others; How tragic it is when I become blind to the blessings, gifts, and favors that God has showered on me.

St. Ignatius, who had been vexed by scruples earlier in his life, once described his experience of being in the midst of a violent storm on a ship traveling from Valencia to Italy. In his *Autobiography*, one reads: “As he examined his conscience and prepared for death, he had no dread for past sins, nor fear of eternal punishment, but he experienced intense shame and sorrow at the thought of not having made a good use of the favors and graces, the blessings that God had bestowed upon him.” When our workday in the vineyard comes to an end, when the shadows lengthen and the nightfall comes, let us not look back at our lives with shame and sorrow. But let us look back and say, imperfect as I have been, I have counted my blessings not compared them to others’, and I have made good use of the many graces and favors God has bestowed upon me.

Today is a day to count our blessings and to celebrate God’s gifts – the gift of life, the gift of vocation, the gift of ministry, the gift of family, the gift of friendship, and the gift of brotherhood in the Society of Jesus.

Warmed by the memory of God's favor in the past, mindful of God's blessing in the present, and trusting in God's grace as we face the future, we wholeheartedly say yes to Christ's invitation to work in his vineyard, because the harvest is great and the laborers are few.