

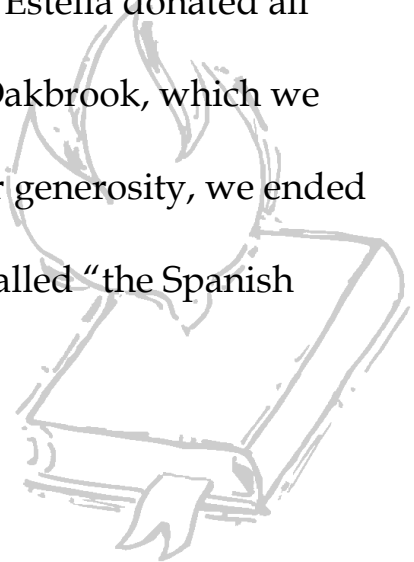
Homily
27th Sunday OT – A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
October 07-08, 2023

Is 5: 1-7
Ps 80: 9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20
Phil 4: 6-9
Mt 21: 33-43

I feel a little guilty because at the end of August, one of my relatives named Mike Cronk was celebrating his 80th birthday in Illinois and I could not join him for this celebration. A few months back, Mike's family sent me an invitation to join them for a celebration honoring his life. Mike and his former wife Lidia (Estella) had been married for over twenty-five years and some years back, Estella's daughter asked me formally to bless their marriage in church before her mother died. As a result, Estella and Mike were exceedingly kind to the parish I served and to me personally, both spiritually and otherwise.

I remember how, at my last parish, Mike and Estella donated all kinds of office furniture from their business in Oakbrook, which we brought down by truck to Joliet. Because of their generosity, we ended up reassembling the furniture at an institution called "the Spanish



Center,” to help low-income families collaborate with volunteer CPAs who assisted these families with their yearly tax preparations.

Towards this cause, we ended up bringing from Oakbrook all kinds of office furniture, partitions, telephones and all those things that are costly for the benefit of the poor and needy over in Joliet. After the work was done, the Spanish Center hosted a big celebration in honor of Mike and Estella’s wonderful gift to the community.

On site at my last parish, the Cronk family also helped me replace windows that were broken and unusable; from their \$6,000, we were able to replace twenty windows in our rectory (that is \$300 a window – good luck finding someone to replace windows for \$300 for parts and labor!). Mike and Estella also helped us significantly at this parish with the parish debt and all kinds of other projects.

Because of the kindness from the Cronk family, we were able to help some people very much in need of God’s mercy. I felt badly that I could not attend Mike’s 80th Birthday Party because I was overloaded with ministry down at the Border Town Parishes. Because of the generosity

and participation of so many good souls, now our parishes are busy on Saturdays with quinceañeras and baptisms and weddings, averaging three to four to sometimes five and six services on any given Saturday or Sunday. This is a lot of work for one priest, but the one thing that these services are providing is that God can work through me to offer grace to all of you.

The reason I could not attend Mike Cronk's birthday celebration was because I was celebrating a wedding service for one of my former secretary's daughters up in Michigan that same weekend. For this family, I ended up celebrating the weddings of all three of Cathy and Jim Weinberg's daughters; the third one took place on the same date as the birthday party.

Because of this dilemma, I offered to hold a private birthday Mass for Mike Cronk in his house the following week. Mike's wife had died shortly after their wedding and Mike was living alone in his house – celebrating Mass for him was the one unique thing I could do for him, to offer the Lord's grace to a man who was suffering. What I did for Mike

was celebrate a Mass at his home and asked him to invite whomever he wanted to this prayerful gathering. I told Mike that I did not want any financial gift; all I asked was his family kept me in their prayers. For him and for you, offering grace without asking for anything back is the way I must live the gospel message to get to heaven; I really mean that because I want you to know how much I care for you.

That said, one part of my Italian family secular traditions stands out for me than the rest – what I really love about investing myself with the Italian family is that every time I go there, any given Italian family will grace me with home-cooked food (not that I need it). The food the Italian family serves me is spectacular, with the pastas, the pizzas and the gelatos. Most importantly, in reference to our readings today, to serve me their *homemade wine* that is unparalleled to any other I have tasted (I am biased about their wines, but still...).

There are many Italian family members related to me who pride themselves on their wine. In fact, I went up to Bensenville a while back to talk to one of my distant relatives named Emma DeBlasio, who also

invited the pastor at her Church (St. Charles Borromeo) to join them with a wonderful homecooked dinner. At this feast, Ema and husband gifted me with their own version of homemade wine. Ema told me that her husband had the big barrel downstairs in their Bensenville home and they fermented their own grapes to produce that wine.

As soon as I tried their vintage, immediately I thought of my other family members of that side of the family and started rating which wine from which Italian family I liked the best. My uncle Frank Novelli had the best wine – when you serve the Masses of Pope Pius XII at the Vatican and learn their skills in this trade, I would say that my Uncle Frank *should* be producing the best wine of everyone on the Italian side of my family. My Uncle Francesco “Cheech” Brotto made a good wine but it was not in the pallete of my tastes. My cousin Leo Mazzulla *really* made strong wine; his was not for the faint of heart.

Back in 1997 I celebrated a wedding liturgy for my cousin Giuseppe (“Pino”) Cosenza and his wife Beatrice and was able to sample the family vintage across the pond. I remember travelling down to the

Cosenza house where my mother was born, a house the Cosenza family still owned. To get to that house, I took one of those old “Sherlock Holmes” Basil Rathbone trains to the southwest corner of the country in the city of Cosenza, Italy. The city of Cosenza was inside the area of Italy’s state of Calabria; as I have said often, Calabria serves as the “toe of the boot” that kicks Sicily on a world map.

During that trip, I ended up celebrating the gift of family, food and *wine* at the Cosenza house where my mother was raised. During that trip, I remember picking the arugula from the farm and climbing up the mountain to get fresh spring water for the luncheon feasts. Back at my relative’s house, I was able to encounter that barrel of fermented wine that the Cosenza family served to me. The wine tasted like grape juice... and then ten minutes later, the “kick” took over and I was out like a light!

At those lunches, I remembered spending hours around that table, enjoying their wine, pasta, pizza and gelato. I remember how, after the lunch ended, the men dragged themselves to their respective bedrooms

for an afternoon siesta while the ladies sat outside the home, drinking their limoncello and making fun about how the men had to sleep. I remember how this lunch turned into a celebration of stories concerning faith and family.

In my experience with the Italian side of my family (and I have found this to be the case with so many cultural groups I encountered in my life), I have just come to learn that making wine is such a specific skill that I do not have, and I very much respect those that can do it.

American wines are so much different than the ones in Italy; American wines must put in their preservatives and such. The Italian wine to me, tastes much better, maybe because my family made it or maybe because they use less preservatives than the American vintage.

Concerning the fermenting of grapes, I recall how my father used to grow them on the Illinois farm where we lived. He did it for decoration because grapes in Illinois are grown not for eating but for decoration. Because Illinois weather is so hot and cold, the grape skins are too thick for any good fruit and they end up tasting awfully sour. There is a skill

to growing grapes well and they really need a constantly warm climate to thrive. My father, being who he was, liked to grow things, not because they would produce good fruit but because he liked the challenge of growing things that could not prosper in Illinois.

That being the case, my father would grow whatever he could on our three-acre farm in Sandwich, IL just like he did so in Plainfield, after he married for a second time (my mother died in an auto accident in 1988; my father remarried five years later). I would not eat the grapes my father produced nor would I ever drink the wine from the grapes, but I understood why my father would grow these fruits, just for the challenge and the satisfaction that he could make the impossible possible within the parameters of Illinois weather.

We could say the same for my Italian family members who fermented wine; some of them did it very well and some maybe did not. Producing wine is a skill and a trade that is part of the Italian heritage and, in a way, is a great symbol in the world of faith. Those that know how to produce good wine have a skill set that is not easy to do in this

world. If you really think about it, there are so many people that try to make wine – some vintages are very good and some are not. It is a skill and a trade that is so important for the wine industry.

The same could apply to those who farm in this area as well. Here in East Kankakee County, we are blessed that Van Drunen Farms, Silva Farms, Momence Packing and so many other farms and businesses support our local communities with a type of skill I certainly do not possess. This is the time of year when our independent farmers try to harvest their produce in a state where growing crops is like rolling the dice in Vegas – you rely so much on good weather and good fortune that when the winds do not blow in your favor, your crops do not produce and the farmers often sell their businesses rather than trying to keep their farms going.

This farm analogy very much parallels what we discuss in our scripture readings this weekend; the farm analogy used in our scriptures this weekend is a testimony to the way we cultivate our faith. Our life is like the produce of the field and the fermenting of grapes. The way we

handle our faith and allow it to grow, to preserve this faith and to allow the owner of the field to lead us and guide us parallels the way we show God how much we follow direction and honor the vine grower. So often in our faith, though, instead of giving thanks to the source of our goodness and the one owns the vineyard, instead of giving thanks to God, sometimes we beat the servants; sometimes we beat the sons.

Sometimes we beat the heir to the land, as we did with our Lord on the cross. Sometimes we would just prefer to have things the way we want them without any regard for our Lord who produced the land on which we live. Sometimes we take farmers for granted just like we do with God. How often do we give thanks to God for the life we have and then nurture that life, nurture that faith as if it were a vineyard, as if it were something that were sacred and important. Often, we take what we have for granted; we do not preserve it, water it, feed it and give it sun and good soil. We give do not give our kids a chance to get to heaven by the way we conduct ourselves and give them a moral compass with God, which is so lost in today's age.

As a result, the children of the next generation are like the lost sheep, without direction and certainly taking for granted the life they are given. The gospel story today teaches us what happens when we forget our way and we need to get 'em back, which is why we try to do what we can to get our kids to church, get our families in church, which is happening in moment. And we need to happen at St. Anne. The demographics in both parishes need to get younger. We need to tell people how to get to heaven, that they need to learn about this love if they wanna make it to the other side. Very much appreciate all our farmers who live that life and set the metaphor by how we need to live ours. Let us take that metaphorical vineyard. Let us treat it as a cherished gift in life. Let us do what we can to keep it growing well by sharing this vineyard and its produce and its love with the people that we meet. This is our prayer.