

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost
“God’s gracious kingdom of heaven where the last are first!”
(Matthew 20:14-16)
September 24, 2023
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our text for this 17th Sunday after Pentecost is from our Gospel reading, Matthew 20:14-16

“14 Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?” 16 So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”

So far the text...

This parable of the workers in the vineyard has a surprise ending, doesn’t it? It makes one scratch one’s head and ask “what just happened?” It runs counter to normal business practices. The last are paid first. And the last are given as much as the first even though they didn’t do as much work as the first workers. What is Jesus telling us here?

Well, Jesus is not telling us how to run a business, but how He runs His church. For Jesus begins the story, the parable, by saying, **“For the kingdom of heaven is like...”**

Jesus is talking about how He runs His spiritual church, His vineyard, – His Kingdom of heaven. For heaven has burst upon earth. God has visited us with His Son, Jesus Christ. And to understand this parable, it is very helpful to remember those very first words that John records in chapter one of his Gospel. We hear them on Christmas day. Let me read them again.

“14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

15 John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ ”
16 And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

The Word, Jesus Christ, comes from heaven above into earth’s dwelling of sinful men and what do we behold? The glory of the law? No! We behold the glory of His grace and truth! And that’s what’s on full display in the parable of the workers in the vineyard...grace. The fullness of His grace is received by the last who didn’t deserve a full day’s pay. But they are treated with grace and are raised up to be the first! How and why? Because God is good and He can do what He wants with what is His.

And God’s goodness is made known to us by His sending of His Son to die for the sins of all people – for you and me. So that we don’t receive what we deserve – eternal condemnation for our sins. But Jesus received what He didn’t deserve – all our punishment on the cross. So that we receive what we don’t deserve – complete forgiveness of our debt.

Yes, that’s what we heard last week, wasn’t it, in parable of the unmerciful servant. The King cancelled His complete debt by grace- everything he couldn’t pay because he begged for mercy. He was free. So Psalm 103 tells us so beautifully that we heard last week,

“The Lord is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.

9 He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever.

10 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities.

11 For as the heavens are high above the earth,

So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;

12 As far as the east is from the west,

So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

So great is His mercy that He makes the last...first!

The last workers don’t deserve a full day’s wage. Some hardly worked even an hour. But they are assured that they will be given what is right, that is, what is right in God’s eyes, not what they deserve. Because we live by grace, not the law!

“And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’”

Again, the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth through Jesus Christ. If you think that you deserve your day’s wage for serving in His vineyard...if you want to make it about the law and not about grace...no one is going to stop you.

But, understand this, if you want to live by the law, that you could somehow deserve the Kingdom of heaven by your own good works, then you who think you are first, are sadly...last!

“Take what is yours and go your way.” Take your self-righteous rags of sin and go! This is what “yours” earns – last place...and entrance into the kingdom of the devil who thought he also could be like God. Take and go your way...and your way leads only to hell!

First and last are turned upside down in God’s gracious Kingdom of heaven. If you want to make it about the letter of the law, and have the audacity to complain against God as if you worked harder and longer than others and so rightly deserve your position of greatness in God’s kingdom, then take what is yours and go! There is no place for the law in God’s kingdom of grace.

It's not about our taking, but about God’s giving. He goes. He searches and calls workers into His Kingdom of Grace and promises eternal life, a full denarius, to all who hear his invitation to serve in His vineyard. Of course, the workers who were called first, didn’t deserve this either. But they convinced themselves that they did.

How quickly we need to remember the words from: **Luke 17:10**

“So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’ ”

Jesus tells us the parable of the workers in the vineyard to further amplify what the Kingdom of grace is all about. You notice that our Gospel reading from Matthew 20 begins with the word “For”.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”

This parable goes back to what happened in chapter 19. For a rich young man came to Jesus with a question.

“Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?”

Alarms are sounding. Red flags are going up with this question. Why? Because this young man is trying to enter the Kingdom of Heaven by the law! What good thing shall I do?

From a young age, we are taught that hard work often results in good grades, scholarships, medals, trophies etc. And, of course, God blesses hard work and sometimes these awards are received. But, possessing eternal life cannot be achieved by our good work...ever. In fact, after the young man went away in sadness, Jesus told His disciples the answer to the most pressing question for each of us.

“Who then can be saved?” 26 But Jesus looked at them and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:25-26)

You see, Jesus told the answer to the young man’s question.

If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”18 He said to Him, “Which ones?”

Jesus said, “‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ 19 ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

If you want to live by the law of Moses. Try. Keep them perfectly – never once breaking even one, and you are first by your own efforts. And, the deluded young man thought that he had.

“All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?”(Matthew 19:20)

No problem, thought the young man. I got this. As kids like to say, “Easy peasy, lemons squeezy”. But, Jesus knew his heart and who was his god – his riches. So, Jesus said, **“If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” (v.21)**

For to do that, would show how would be living by mercy and grace alone. To show mercy to the poor would show that he had received great mercy from God for his soul and that life was not about the abundance of this world’s riches but about the abundance of God riches in Christ. These are the riches which make the last first. These are the riches of Jesus’ shed blood that make the impossible – possible.

Sadly, the rich young man went away. He took what was his, his deluded self-righteousness and the god of money that he followed, and was gone!

He thought he was first, but in reality he was last.

But thanks be to God that He lifts up the repentant soul from last to first through faith in Jesus. Thanks be to God that He forgives our evil eye, our evil heart and gives to us not what we deserve, but what is right only through Jesus Christ!

And how right it is! For God graciously gives to us complete forgiveness of our sins. He calls us into His Kingdom of heaven in our baptism and washes us clean. God nourishes our souls with the sacrament of the altar for we daily fail to keep His commandments. Which ones? All of them. But, in the sacrament of the altar we are given, given, the very body of Jesus and His shed blood for our forgiveness. So that, we who are last because of our sins are made first by the grace of God!

And God does the impossible over ,and over, and over again for us through His gracious Word and Sacraments! Amen

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)