Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Who’s More Valuable?**

**Matthew 20:1-9**

Septuagesima

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At the end of the day, when the wages were being passed out by the foreman, what did you think? At a wage rate of $15 an hour, a full day’s wages (they work twelve-hour days) is $180. The first one who got paid had only worked an hour and opening his pay envelope found $180. Thinking it an error, he quickly made for the door. But dDo you think this remained a secret?

As the others who were hired last opened their pay envelopes to find the first had not been a mistake, the talk began among those still waiting for theirs.

Normal thinking would have suspected these first to be paid $15, the next $45 for three hours, the next $90, the next $135, and only those hired earliest in the morning – having worked a full twelve hours – would receive a full $180. But the scuttlebutt is that all those hired for the last hour received an envelope with $180.

Now greed compounded sinfulness as those not yet paid came forward smiling foolishly, thinking that the new pay rate was $180 an hour. Those hired about the ninth hour, having done the three hours of labor math – expecting $540, those having worked six – expecting $1,080, those have worked nine – expecting $1,620 Those who put in a whole day, at the back of the line are doing the dance of joy – cha-ching cha-ching – as the expect $2,160 for their twelve hours of labor.

But as those who worked 3 hours open their pay envelopes, they are disappointed to find only $180 – but they are pleased with $135 more than they expected. This rumor also trickles back, and it just gets more and more disappointing until those who worked all day receive their pay. They also find $180, a full day’s wage – just as they had agreed to – in their envelopes.

These last, having now stood in line for another fifteen minutes, only to be treated to what they believed was a certain inequity, grumble to the owner of the vineyard. You can hear them using modern language, “What’s this insult? Who’s more valuable to you and your vineyard? These last lay-abouts only woke up from last night’s bended to work one hour, and you paid them the same as you paid us. We’ve been slaving under the blistering sun all day. This isn’t fair. Either you fix this and give us what we deserve, or we’re calling a lawyer.”

The owner of the vineyard says, “Did I not pay you what we agreed you would be paid?”

“But you paid them as much as you paid us! That it isn’t fair.”

The owner quietly asks, “Did I pay you what we agreed upon? Did I short you in any way?”

Again they respond, “But that’s not the point! You paid them as much as you paid us, that ain’t right.”

Again the owner calmly asks, “Did you and I agree to $15 an hour – $180 for the day – when you went into the vineyard this morning?”

They nod grudgingly.

He continues, “It is my vineyard, and my money, correct?”

Again, they must agree.

He continues, “If I choose to give them as much as I give you, I am the one being foolishly over-generous. I know they certainly have not earned it! In fact, we could have agreed that I would pay you less than we did agree to? But as it is my money, am not allowed to be foolish with what it mine?”

Dear friends, this is not Jesus suggesting we are to cure inequity between rich and poor. Nor is Jesus attempting to teach some form of social justice.

Jesus is teaching the incredibly gracious nature of God. This is a parable about the kingdom of heaven and the incredibly gracious Master of that Kingdom.

When it comes to the simple question of, “Who’s more valuable in the kingdom?” How do you answer? More important might be, “Who do you THINK is more valuable in God’s kingdom?”

We have some ideas about who is and who is not valuable. We were all waiting to see who the NFL would name MVP for this past season.

Yes, we do have an idea of what is most valuable – usually based upon how well that person or thing works. That attitude also spills over into our thinking about God’s kingdom.

Our Gospel lesson is not an incident happening in a vacuum. Jesus tells this parable is in the midst of larger context of teaching. He'd been talking about marriage, had blessed some children, and then a rich young ruler came and asked Him, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?”

Jesus told him that to enter life he must keep the commandments. The rich young ruler asked Him, “which ones?” Jesus responds with the second table of the law. Then the rich man, declaring he had kept them, asked, “What am I still lacking?”

Notice that he thinks there is more he needs to do to earn his place.

Jesus tells him to sell all his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and then come follow him. The rich man walked away sorrowful.

Turning to His disciples, Jesus declared that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Astonished, Jesus’ disciples ask Him, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus told them that with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Peter, always the bold one, willing to say what's on everybody's mind, asks, “Behold, we have left everything and followed you; what then will there be for us?”

“Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Immediately Jesus continues speaking with the words of our Gospel lesson. Which brings us back to our question, “Who's more valuable?” The disciples had wanted to know who was going to sit at His right hand and left hand in the Kingdom. They had argued about who is the greatest. In part, Judas betrayed Jesus because he thought he deserved a greater place among the disciples.

Who's more valuable to the church today? Our gut first response might be to say that the pastor is, but is he? Looking at the greater church body, one might say it is the district president, or maybe the Synodical president. But is that true?

In regard God’s kingdom, whose works have earned a place in the Kingdom? Is the Synodical president righteous and holy? The District President? Is a pastor more righteous and holy than the members he's been called by God to serve?

Simply put, who has done enough to gain a place in God's Kingdom? Who earns Paradise?

Maybe you think you are more valuable in the Kingdom. At least you aren't one of those folks who shows up for church only twice a year. You are here regularly! When they ask for volunteers, you're one who usually helps out. You are at least better than those folks who rarely show up, and never volunteer.

Do you hear yourself in our text? “These last have hardly worked at all, and they are rarely in church, and you've made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

Dear friends we talk about Christ's active righteousness and His passive righteousness. Most talk focuses on his passive righteousness, the fact that Jesus suffered, died, was buried, and was then raised on the third day. These were things done to Him by evil, vile men. He was passive as it was done to Him – at any time in the doing of them, He could have extricated Himself from the situation. He could even have come down off the cross. But He did not!

Also remember what took place a little over a month ago. In the nativity of our Lord, Jesus is God who took on human flesh. He submitted Himself, as a man, to the laws which He Himself had delivered through Moses to His people. He was actively righteousness. His submitted His entire life to all the laws of the land. He was perfect life in thought, word, and deed, He perfectly kept the law – His active righteousness.

He did all this not for Himself. He did it for those who cannot do it for themselves. He did it for; the Synodical President, the North Wisconsin District President, Pastor Jerabek, and all people. He fulfilled the law and gave Himself as the sacrifice under the law, to redeem those under the condemnation of the law because of their unrighteousness.

Let's ask the question again, “Who's more valuable?” Now our initial response would be to immediately say, “Jesus!” Indeed, without Christ's active and passive righteousness in our behalf, we would be nothing. In fact, we would be lost eternally.

I'm going to ask the question one more time, “Who's more valuable?” Is it those who have done more work in the church?

Hear the Owner of the vineyard speak, “Friend am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

Our place in the Kingdom has been reserved and paid in full by the incredible grace of our Savior God. The blood of Christ shed upon the cross purchased a place for you, for me, and for all in His kingdom. Were it not for His generosity, we would receive nothing!

Oops, I better take that back! We would receive something! But it is not something I even care to think about…it is warmer there than we would like – even as we pray for warmth in our winter wonderland. Our reward would be eternal torment.

Who's more valuable? Each and every one of you is precious to God. Each and every one of you is one of His beloved and special lambs. For you He died! Today it is He who feeds, nourishes, and cares for you, preparing you as His kingdom of Grace. “Friend am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

With resounding joy we declare, “No, I do not begrudge it, I only give you thanks!” Thanks be to God for your gracious mercy given to us in overwhelming abundance in Christ Jesus our lord. Amen.