**Last Will Be First**

**Matthew 20:1-9**

Septuagesima

02.5.2023

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

You and I have our ideas of workplace “fairness” don’t we? Usually it is based upon ideas simple equity. A fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work. It does not always go that was though, does it. Someone is not happy. Whatever the reason may be, someone always thinks they’re getting the rotten end of the stick.

“I have more education, I should get paid more.”

“I have worked here for 20 years, how come the new young, new hires are making the same as me.”

And of course, the church is not exempt from such thinking. It is time for the request for people to assist with the soup dinner – and also time to get people to sign up to prepare Lenten suppers. I know what will some will say, “It is always the same people who do all the work. Aren’t there more members of this congregation that can help?” And then it will be, “10% of the people always do 90% of the work.”

“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

Dear friends, I wonder if you have ever looked at what takes place in the conversations between the owner of the vineyard and those he sends into the vineyards. Let us note that the master of the vineyard went to get workers early in the morning, at the third hour, sixth hour, ninth hour, and at the eleventh hour.

Those going out early in the morning, have a contract, the master and the laborers agreed to a denarius for a day’s labor. Those sent into the vineyard at the third, sixth, and ninth hours have a more vague agreement with the master, “Whatever is right I will give you.” Their going into the vineyard is their acceptance of the agreement. While those hired at the eleventh hour have neither a firm nor vague agreement. The master simply instructs them, “You go into the vineyard too.”

All the problems begin when the owner has the foremen, the steward, pay them their wages – beginning with the last, and working backward to those first hired. When those hired at the eleventh hour received their pay, which was exactly what was promised to those who had begun the day at the first hour, some incredible math began to happen in the minds of those who had spent the whole day in the vineyard.

Today it would be all over the interweb – talking heads would be discussing it on TV – social media would be burning up the 5G band-with. Unfairness of the most egregious kind. It began with a few grapevines for his wife on the clothesline. A couple bottles shared with friends. They expressed how great his experiments tasted. It grew to a couple hundred acres and a Fortune 500 company.

Now it is all over the news how he treated some of his hardest working employees. Accusations of playing favorites. Quite the scandal! And what was his response to all the inquires at the press conference? “The last will be first, and the first last.”

We want things in the work-a-day world to be fair. You know, that is understandable. We obviously know that some folks should be paid a bit more for different reasons. Some for their seniority, they make big the decisions which affect everybody. Some as a reward for their many years of faithfulness to the company. Others because of their sacrifice of money and time to get the special the education required to prepare them for the work they do. Some get paid more because their job requires them to risk their lives, or because it is such a “dirty” job.

When it comes time to take on tasks which are voluntary, we like to see people pitch in and help carry the load. We all know the cliches! “Many hands make light work.” “We’re all in this together.” “We either paddle together, or we’ll drown separately.”

Does Jesus tell this parable to teach us anything at all about social justice? Is this parable about some new idea of fairness in paying wages? No!

Jesus begins by saying, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”

On Thursday evening, Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.” (Luke 22:42) He knew what was coming. He was arrested and brought before the High Priest and the Jewish Council. They found Him guilty of blasphemy and sentenced Him to death – but since they were under Roman rule, they could not carry out such punishment.

Do you understand the hours Jesus uses in His parable?

It was the first hour of that Friday we call good when Jesus is brought before Pilate by the Sanhedrin. At the third hour He is nailed to the cross. At the sixth hour, darkness covers the land. “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Jesus cries out. He is thirsty and they lift up a sponge with wine-vinegar on it. It is the ninth hour that He finally declares, τετέλεσται – “It is finished!” All is now accomplished. And He gives up His Spirit and breathes His last.

It is about the eleventh hour that they are laying Him in His tomb so that it He is not on the cross for that Sabbath.

In the kingdom of God, the harvest is plentiful, who is laboring in the vineyard? Our Master has called us to do so. He has promised us wages. But they are wages based upon His incredible generosity. “I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” So the last will be first, and the first last.

Who deserves more in God’s kingdom? Pastors do, right? They have sacrificed all to serve the Lord. Maybe their wives, have given up as much or more, having to move wherever their husband/pastor goes.

Maybe those who have held special jobs in the church deserve more in God’s kingdom? Congregational president? Elders? Sunday school teachers? Ladies group president? Certainly those who have done something more than just show up at church on a regular basis, right?

Each is given their vocational callings by God – whether father, mother, brother, sister, employer, employee, citizen, friend, neighbor, or any other vocations we might have. We are all baptized into Christ. We are all sent out by God as laborers in the kingdom. Christian is your first vocation.

All work in the kingdom! All have different tasks! All were called by the Master to serve in the kingdom! All receive a denarius!

Who is the One who does the work? Christ! We cannot keep score, for we have all earned the same wages – the wages of sin. Those wages are not something we truly want to endure.

I pray that we see ourselves in this parable as standing under God’s judgment when we become like those who think we deserve something because we have somehow earned it.

Did you notice that the hours Jesus uses in His parable are based upon what will happen to Him on Good Friday? What is fair about that? That’s the true score – Jesus does it all – you do nothing! Innocence is sacrificed to pay the wages earned by the sinfulness of the guilty.

Did you note that those hired later would receive what is “right.” God fulfills His promise – He gives us gifts that makes us “right” with Him. He gives us His righteousness.

Whatever makes you right, He gives to you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit are the words spoken and the wet Word of Baptism cleanses you of sin. What is Christ’s is yours – His death, His resurrection.

When pastors speak at the command of Christ, and by His authority, sins are forgiven. The Master makes you right with Him.

At His table, Jesus takes the same body and blood once crucified for our sins and risen from the dead, and with His Word, He sacramentally unites it to simple bread and wine, placing it into your mouth for salvation. He can do whatever He wants with what belongs to Him, and He chooses to give you His flesh and blood for your salvation. He strengthens you in the faith while it is day to preserve you steadfast in the faith to do your work in His kingdom until the night comes when no one can work.

When it comes to the kingdom of God, what do you earn? We need to truly understand the incredible difference between the things of our worldly life and the things which are ours in the kingdom of God.

First, all we have – all anybody has - everything that has to do with this body and life is a gracious gift of God.

But more importantly, our place in God’s kingdom of Grace – His Church – is ours by His grace. He has taken those of us who are least and made us first. He has granted us a place in His eternal kingdom of Glory solely because He who was first, became the least – the despised One, the forsaken One, the crucified – God’s own Son, the Christ.

You are the dearly beloved of God. You and I are those who are last, those who have been brought into the kingdom by the mercy of the Master. The last have become first by the gracious generosity of our Master. Thanks be to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.