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Pentecost XVII & Proper 20
September 20, 2026
Text: Matthew 20:1 – 16
Title: It's Just a Matter of Common Sense

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. This church year's assigned readings has had us walk through St. Paul's epistle to the Romans over the past several weeks which have also been used as our sermon texts. At the same time, these readings – or pericopes as they are called – have focused on the ministry of Jesus as told by the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Tomorrow is the day that the Christian church remembers and gives thanks for the apostle Matthew and his work in spreading the Gospel.

We know from his own writing that before he was called by Jesus, Matthew was a tax collector. That work would have immediately made him a traitor to his fellow Jews, someone who shouldn't be associated with by anyone who wanted to be seen as righteous and respectable. But when Jesus called him, Matthew became an apostle who turned away from his former crooked life and literally repented.

Matthew's Gospel focuses on the humanity of Jesus, and it also makes sure to focus on how many ways the life and ministry of Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy. From the detailed genealogy in the very beginning to the events on Palm Sunday to his account of the crucifixion, Matthew points out how Jesus is the Messiah promised throughout the history of Israel. To a Jewish person reading Matthew's writing, the prophecies that are fulfilled by Jesus would have been obvious. It would have been common sense.

Today's sermon text comes to us from chapter 20 of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is once again telling a parable to illustrate how the kingdom of heaven works. A land-owner needs help in his vineyard, and he goes to hire some day laborers, but it seems that the land-owner in

today's Gospel lesson has a problem, and that is a serious lack of common sense. It should be pretty simple right? That land-owner is able to hire some men to work all day, and he promised to pay them a standard day's wages, a denarius. He also hired some more men three hours later to do the same work. Three hours after that, he hired more men for the same work, and three hours later hired still more. Even at the eleventh hour, which was 11 hours after the first men were hired, the boss sent still more men into the vineyard to do the same work as the first group of men. Now, who deserves the greater pay?

Common sense would tell you that the first group of men, the ones who worked all day long, should get paid more than the last group of men who only worked for an hour. That's fair, isn't it? A day's work for a day's pay. It makes sense, right? Of course it does.

But Jesus tells us that something unexpected happened. The owner decided that he was going to pay all of the workers the same. No matter how long they were in the vineyard each one was paid exactly the same amount, a denarius! That's not right! That's not fair! All of those workers should get what they deserve, shouldn't they? It just doesn't make any sense!

It definitely doesn't! That owner is a complete fool! He certainly doesn't have any idea how to keep his employees happy. The men who worked the longest should get the most pay, right? That's just common sense. They did most of the work so they should get the most money. But the owner isn't interested in hearing any of that. They endured the heat of the day, but the owner doesn't seem to care. The owner is cold. He's unfair. The owner wants to cheat the men who worked the most. The owner is God.

That's right. The master of the vineyard, who seems cold, unfair, and uncaring according to what should be simple common sense, is God Himself. He's to blame. You see, Jesus ultimately isn't concerned with anything other than your relationship to Him and His Father.

Jesus wants you to know what kind of Father He is, and how He chooses to deal with you, His child. And as in all things, God does things on His terms, not ours.

Unfortunately, most of the time we don't want to hear Him or have anything to do with Him on His own terms. We want to have a relationship with Him on our terms. We want things to be our way. "The last will be first, and the first last?" That's crazy! It doesn't make any sense!

If you're first in line, you deserve to stay at the front. If you work the longest, you deserve the greatest reward. If you're a Christian all of your life, you deserve a better place in heaven than someone who becomes a Christian on her death bed. You want what's coming to you, and you deserve it! You're not asking too much. It's just common sense, right?

Your sinful nature doesn't care about God's way of doing things, you get along just fine on your own, thank you. Oh, you don't mind having Him in your life as long as He's there in the way that you think He should be. But you know better than God does, at least that's what your sinful nature has you believing.

"My God is a God of love." But the Bible has numerous accounts of His wrath and judgment. "All religions are the same." But Jesus makes it clear that He is the only source of truth and the only way to everlasting life. "I have faith in Christ because I decided too." But the Word of God makes it abundantly clear that you are helpless and dead on your own, and you are saved only because He gives you faith and life as a free gift apart from anything that you do or say. "Evil and wicked people deserve to be punished!" But God promises that He will forgive the sins of all sinners for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ.

That doesn't make any sense either, does it? Think about it for a minute. You want what you deserve, but what you deserve...what you *really* deserve...for even the smallest iota of sin at

any time of your life, is eternal damnation! That's the ultimate and just penalty for your sin. But God forgives all of those sins, and instead of the proper penalty of eternal death, you are given the free and most precious gifts of forgiveness and everlasting life. Now that *definitely* goes against common sense.

And it shouldn't surprise us that it does. Isaiah clearly tells us in the Old Testament lesson for today why it shouldn't be a surprise. The Lord says through him, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." What great news that is! Our Lord just doesn't do things the same way that we do.

Instead, He does things that really don't make a lot of sense to us. He uses common things to accomplish His good and perfect will. He washed you clean as a tiny baby with simple water combined with His Word, and He gave you the same gift of faith that you still cling to today. He gives you the forgiveness of sins by feeding you Christ's body and blood combined in, with, and under simple bread and wine. He bought that forgiveness through the victory of the cross which up until Christ's resurrection had been a sign of defeat and shame. To eyes that try to see with the reason of the world, these things go completely against all reason and common sense, but to the eyes of faith, these things are nothing short of miracles and gifts from our all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, infinitely merciful God.

These gifts are for everyone, and they are available to anyone as long as they are still living in this world. He asks only that you share the gifts that He has given to you. He charges you to go against common sense and share this most valuable of all of your possessions with anyone and everyone. Share those valuable gifts with anyone around you who does not know what Christ did on the cross, and who thinks that Christianity is just about living a good life.

Tell them about the free gift of forgiveness that is available to them. Help them to see that a life without Christ is really no life at all, and that they desperately need the same Savior who saved you and claims you as His own.

This is a job that is never done while you are still drawing breath and are able to speak. It is a job that you are never fully trained for, but it is one that you are never doing alone either. Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to guide you and to work through you, and He has left His Holy Word and the Sacraments to make you stronger and better equipped. And as we read at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has promised to be with you, His faithful people, always until the very end of time.

But the end of time is getting closer by the hour. Christ tells us that He will return, and on that day it will be too late for anyone who is not already a part of the owner's work crew. Until that day, He has hired all of you to go out from these four walls into His harvest field. There is much to be done, but the reward is guaranteed and it is one that will be given to all, no matter how late they are made a part of His work crew because that's the way that the Boss wants it to be. After all, the Boss, the Lord God, can do whatever He wants to do with what is His. That is, of course, just common sense! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.