

September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Lord liked to teach in parables. He used them to explain things to His disciples and other hearers, explain things which might be difficult to understand but can be better grasped with a metaphor. A parable is just an extended metaphor with a specific point to be made, either theological or moral. Our Gospel reading today from Matthew 20 presents us with a hurdle for us to overcome and that is the parable given, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, has been separated from the original question the disciples asked Jesus. Remember that chapter and verse numbers are not divinely inspired. They are things we added centuries later to help us find certain places in Scripture and refer to them. Well the break between chapters 19 and twenty is unfortunate, because this entire parable is in answer to Peter's question in chapter 19.

The rich young man had just come to Jesus and wanted to know what to do earn eternal life. After Jesus told him to obey the Commandments, the young man brashly said that he already did that... as if fulfilling the Commandments was something you do once, as if fulfilling them perfectly were even possible. So Jesus, knowing the young man's heart, told him to give away all of his possessions, knowing that he was wealthy and trusted in his wealth above all else. He went away sad and Jesus told his disciples that **"it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."** (19:24) The disciples were shocked and asked Him, **"Who then can be saved?"** (19:25). Peter took it a step further, asking on behalf of all the disciples, **"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"** (19:27) You see, what Peter and the eleven took away from that exchange was not what they should have. They, like most people in their day, viewed the wealthy as being blessed by God, a view that exists even today among so-called Christians, especially followers of the false Prosperity Gospel. It teaches that if you are wealthy, God is rewarding you. If you are poor, then you are doing something wrong. So Peter pointed out that they had all left their professions and families behind to follow Jesus, so surely that counted for something. They wanted to be sure that their efforts, their sacrifices and obedience counted for something. Jesus told them that the Twelve were marked for positions of honor, to help judge Israel at the end of time, but not because of what they themselves had done. Just because they were "early adopters" didn't earn them any points and anything they did in the service of God did not gain them special merit. In fact, some of those who came to faith early would be the weakest. He told them, **"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."** (19:30) God's doesn't think the way we do. His gifts are not tied to our actions. It is not a matter of deserving anything. Just like Madilyn didn't deserve to become a child of God this morning. And yet, now she is, by the grace of God.

In response to Peter's questions, Jesus told them the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. The beginning is pretty straightforward: The master or landowner, went out in the morning to hire laborers. They agreed to a work for a denarius a day, which was a typical day's wage. The master went back to the marketplace at "the third hour" – which is 9am – and hired some more laborers who were idle and sent them into his field. He did this several times throughout the day, at noon, at 3pm, and finally at 5pm, just an hour before quitting time. After they stopped for the day, the master told the steward to pay them in reverse order, the last being paid first. Surprisingly, the last ones hired received a full day's pay. Then the next did, and the next, until finally the ones who were hired first were also given a full day's pay. This made them mad and jealous. They saw the master's generosity as a bad thing. They did not rejoice for their fellow workers, for those who receive undeserved grace. They grew covetous of what they thought was unfair pay and thought, well, I deserve even more.

This part of the parable makes us uncomfortable because we like to picture ourselves as being "early adopters", as those hired straight away in the morning. *I was raised in the church. I have gone here my whole life... or at least until I was confirmed and then I took a couple of decades off. But still, I should be treated better, I should have earned more.* The result is that we think less of those who come to the faith later in life, as if they haven't really "earned" God's grace by punching the clock for many years. So the single mother who starts coming to church is viewed differently than the old matriarch who was baptized into the congregation as an infant and never missed a Sunday. The parable continues with the master addressing the grumbling workers:

**"Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. 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?"** (v.13-15)

The parable is really a lesson about God's grace, about the Triune God giving us what we do not deserve and could never earn on our own. We should not begrudge those who receive the same forgiveness, who share in God's mercy and the promise of everlasting life. But we do. We do it in the way we treat others whom we think have sinned more than we have. *That person cannot be forgiven, so I won't even bother inviting them to church. That person has a horrible past, so I won't share the Gospel of Jesus with them. That person wronged me years ago and so I won't even sit in the same pew as her.* We pass judgement on people all the time, thinking that this person deserves a full day's wage and that person does not, as if the wage were ours to give! We are greedy with what we have been given and think that for that person to be given the same reward just isn't fair. We don't want them to join us in God's forgiveness, the same way that Job didn't want God to forgive his enemies, the Ninevites and he resented it when God did.

The abortion doctor who has killed hundreds of unborn children in her career... she has done nothing to deserve God's grace. By her actions, by her rebellion against God, she has only earned His wrath. But if she repents and places herself at His mercy, it is mercy she shall receive. The practicing homosexual who publicly advocates for LGBTQ causes,

is not beyond God's mercy either. When anyone repents of their sins, no matter how dark, no matter how numerous, they will be forgiven. Whoever turns from the wide road of sin to the narrow path of Christ receives the same reward: Forgiveness and mercy and life eternal. This should comfort us, because there are many sins we keep hidden, sins which we would be utterly ashamed of if others found out about them. Sins we are reluctant to even think of, let alone confess to God. That infidelity years ago when your spouse was away. The money we've been taking from work, thinking that it isn't really stealing if nobody notices. That website we keep visiting late at night thinking God will not notice if we clear the browser history. We are not as deserving as we think we are. Which is why we are jealous for the grace given to others. We think that if we are compared to others, we will be found wanting, that maybe God will change His mind.

But God knows our weaknesses. He knows our sins better than we do. When we confess our sins, either corporately or in individual confession, we aren't telling God anything He doesn't already know. We are just dropping the façade, the mask we wear to fool others and ourselves. But God wants you to stop pretending. He is not stingy with His forgiveness. Centuries before Jesus was born, He told His people of His mercy through the prophet Isaiah: **"let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. 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."** (Isaiah 55:7-9)

So, my fellow eleventh-hour workers, do not be jealous of the grace of God. Rejoice that He has had compassion on us. Rejoice that His thoughts are not our thoughts, His ways are not our ways. Give thanks that the way we judge others is not the way He judges us. He has declared that you are worthy enough to be saved, saved through the blood of the Lamb, His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. He has washed you clean through His life-giving water, water made holy by His all-powerful Word, and made you a member of His household, a true child of God. He invites you to His table, not as a servant, but as His own child, and like a child we yearn to receive what our generous Father gives us. We do not begrudge His generosity because we are the biggest recipients of it. And that is why we come back to His house week after week, to approach His table and receive the wages we did not earn.

In Jesus name, amen.

Rev. Schopp