

Septuagesima Sunday

St. Matthew 20:1-16: "It Isn't Fair!"

January 27/28, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

### In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty God, heavenly Father, who in the last hour of time have called us into Your vineyard and of Your grace given us all manner of undeserved temporal and spiritual gifts, grant, we humbly ask You, that, trusting only in Your mercy, we may at all times in patience and humility render unto You cheerful and patient service and never murmur against Your goodness, to the end that we may not be denied and rejected by You, but continue in Your household and glorify and praise Your marvelous grace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 79)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the twentieth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

[Jesus said:] "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. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. / "And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. / "Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' / "They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' / "And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, '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.' / "But he replied to one of them, '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?' / "So the last will be first, and the first last." (ESV)

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who bore the burden of sin and the scorching heat of hell to save you, dear fellow redeemed:

It is at a very young age that children begin to develop an eye, a keen sense, for fairness. If a child sees his mother holding a different child in her arms, that isn't fair. If you have a toy and I don't, that isn't fair. If the piece of dessert you get is bigger than the one I get, that isn't fair. If

Mom or Dad tell me to clean up a mess I did not make, that isn't fair. But that keen sense for fairness is troublingly inconsistent. If things are going the way someone wants – like receiving a bigger piece of dessert or watching someone else clean up your mess – then there is no protest.

If only this is something we outgrew. But that eye for fairness stays as sharp as ever – at least in certain situations. If a co-worker gets a raise, then I should too. If I work hard, I should be rewarded. If I go out of my way for my neighbors, they should go out of their way for me. But who is to say what is fair and what isn't? Some say it isn't fair for one person to have more money and another to have less. They say everyone should have the same amount, regardless of ability, experience, or work ethic. That might seem fair to those who have less, but not to those who have more. Who gets to decide?

Similar questions can be asked in spiritual matters: How does God decide whom to give blessings to and when? How is it determined who will be saved? Do we always receive what we deserve from God?

## I

These questions are addressed in Jesus' parable about the laborers in the vineyard. A parable is an earthly illustration that teaches spiritual truth. When Jesus spoke His parables, they always had a context. The context of today's parable is found in the previous chapter of Matthew, chapter 19. There, we learn about a rich young man who asked Jesus, "*Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?*" (19:16). Jesus told him that he would enter life by keeping the commandments. The young man felt that he had kept them. Jesus replied, "*If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me*" (v. 21). The man went away sorrowful, because he could not bear to give up his possessions.

Thinking about Jesus' response, the Apostle Peter said, "*See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?*" If heavenly treasures could be gained by giving up earthly goods, then the disciples should be in good shape. Jesus did not deny that the twelve disciples would be rewarded for their faithful work. He said that anyone who left the comforts of this life – including home, family, and possessions – for His name's sake, would "*receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life*" (v. 29). "*But,*" He cautioned, "*many who are first will be last, and the last first*" (v. 30).

Then Jesus spoke His parable, "*For the kingdom of heaven is like.*" The parable was a further explanation of His prior teaching. It was meant to expand on the warning that "*many who are first will be last, and the last first.*" These were good words for the disciples to hear. They were often concerned about being first, about being the greatest. They would even argue about this among themselves. But they didn't feel so great when they ran away from Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and hid away in fear following His death. Then this parable, which might have been difficult for them to swallow when they heard it at first, would have become a comfort to them.

It should also be a comfort to us, but we have the same sinful inclinations that the disciples had. We are overly concerned about being the first in line and getting our fair share. Many of us here can recognize ourselves in the laborers who agreed to work for the vineyard owner for a

denarius a day. There was no unclarity about the compensation. The payment offered for a day's work was fair. They willingly went to the vineyard.

This is like us who were baptized as infants and have been church-going Christians as long as we can remember. We were sent into the vineyard at the first hour. We have endured "*the burden of the day and the scorching heat*" that comes from confessing Christ. We have experienced the disconnect from the world and the discomfort of following Jesus. We have been willing to do this, because we know we will have a heavenly reward, the gift of eternal life.

But we are not the only laborers in the Lord's vineyard. Others are brought in at the third hour and the sixth hour, and the ninth hour, and even the eleventh hour. Some might live wildly through their teenage and young adult years before they repent of their sins. Are they of the same quality of worker as those who did not do these things? Some reject and blaspheme Jesus for better than half their life before they are brought to repentance. Shouldn't they be held accountable for their years of unbelief in some way? Some leave a trail of lies and abuse and manipulation before they are converted. Should they really be allowed in the vineyard? These are fair questions.

But it is also fair to ask about the quality of work done by each laborer. Is the longest-tenured employee of a company always the best worker? Sometimes this is the case, but not always. A long-time employee can develop bad habits and get by on the bare minimum, while a newer worker may be grateful for the job and motivated to work hard. The same can be true of life-long Christians compared with new converts. It is also fair to ask what each worker is actually entitled to. Did the owner of the vineyard have to hire the people in the marketplace? Couldn't he have looked for workers in some other place, or not at all?

## II

It is a lot easier to think of reasons why others should not be called to work in the vineyard, than it is to acknowledge the things that disqualify me. But Jesus spoke this parable because He clearly perceived the plank in His disciples' eyes, just as clearly as He perceives the plank in mine. He knows I am inclined to judge myself softly and others harshly, and that my sense of fairness is skewed in my favor.

This is how it works: If I fail to show love for my neighbor, I will tell myself that the fault lies with him or her. If someone harms me, I will justify the revenge I take since "they had it coming." If I sin, I shrug it off as unintentional or an honest mistake, but if someone else commits the same sin, they won't be let off so easily.

You and I are not reliable judges in spiritual matters, but God is. He knows exactly how our life matches up with His labor standard. The job of every single person is to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things, and to love one's neighbor as himself. Sometimes we have worked hard at this, other times we leaned on our shovel and expected someone else to take care of the job, and sometimes we just ignored our responsibility altogether. What would you do with an employee who had work habits like this?

It would be fair for God to dismiss us from His vineyard. He gave us a job to do, and we have not done it. He brought others to work side-by-side with us, and we looked down on them,

treating them like they were second-class. The only wages we have earned are the wages of sin, which is death (Rom. 6:23). Eternal death is the fair compensation for the sinful life we have lived.

But the Lord is merciful. Without changing His standard, which is holy, just, and good, He planned a way to fulfill it for us. God the Father sent His only Son to do the job we had failed to do. When He went about His work, He was not treated fairly. He was innocent in every way, and yet He was charged with all sorts of wrongdoing. Peter writes that *“When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly”* (1Pe. 2:23). He went to the cross to suffer and die for sins He had not committed – for your sins and mine. That was not fair, but it is your salvation.

You are not saved by making sure you get your fair share in this life, or by making sure that others do. Social justice is no one’s ticket to heaven. You are not saved by working long enough and hard enough in the Lord’s vineyard. No amount of your imperfect work can get the job done. You are not saved because you are somehow better-natured, less obstinate, more receptive, or any other way that human reason tries to explain why some are saved and others are not. As Paul writes, your salvation *“depends not on human will or exertion”* (Rom. 9:16).

You are saved solely and entirely by the grace of God. You are saved because *“The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”* (Ps. 103:8). You are saved because *“He does not deal with [you] according to [your] sins, nor repay [you] according to [your] iniquities”* (v. 10). You are saved because Jesus did a perfect job of fulfilling God’s standard on your behalf, and because He applied His bloody sweat and selfless work as the full atonement for your sins.

Are you in any position, then, to grumble about how and to whom the Lord dispenses His treasures of grace? Is it not an honor to work for Him in His vineyard, and an even greater honor to work there for the full span of one’s earthly life? We do not deserve this honor. We deserve to be left idle and penniless in the marketplace. That would be fair. But the Lord chooses to give to the last worker what He gives to the first. He gives the opposite of what we have earned by our sin, which **“Isn’t Fair!”** But it is grace!

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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