

Septuagesima Sunday

St. Matthew 20:1-16: "Jesus Chose You by Grace."

January 30/31, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, through Your holy Word You have called us into Your vineyard: Send, we beseech You, Your Holy Spirit into our hearts, that we may labor faithfully in Your vineyard, shun sin and all offense, obediently keep Your Word and do Your will, and put our whole and only trust in Your grace, which You have bestowed upon us so abundantly; through Your Son Jesus Christ, that we might obtain eternal salvation through Him; who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, p. 151)

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

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)

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

In Christ Jesus, who called us by His grace, so that we should bear fruit in His name (Joh. 15), dear fellow redeemed:

We can understand the bitterness of the workers who worked all day in the hot sun for a denarius. They weren't especially bitter about the amount of payment. They had agreed to work for this amount, and it was a fair wage. What made them upset was that the workers who worked for only one hour received the same amount. Who wouldn't be upset about that? What

made it even worse was that the owner of the vineyard paid the last workers first. It's like he wanted to rub it in the faces of those who had worked all day.

This made them feel like their hard work was unappreciated, like their good efforts had been wasted. Have you ever felt this way? I think we all have. You did the hard work, and someone else got the credit. You consistently went above and beyond but were treated no different than your lazy co-workers. You have been walked over, pushed aside, and passed by more times than you can count. What has that done to your morale? Has it caused you to give less than your best? After all, what's the point of giving everything you've got when you will be treated just like everyone else?

This is what the brother of the prodigal son was thinking. His younger brother had insulted their father, taken his inheritance, and squandered everything in reckless living (Luk. 15:13). Now he had returned home, and his father was throwing a big party! The older son was angry and said to his father, *"Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"* (vv. 29-30).

It doesn't seem right. It isn't fair. But it is a picture of grace. Grace is undeserved love. It is showing kindness, compassion, and generosity when those things are not warranted. Like the brother of the prodigal son, it is hard for us to be gracious. We like to focus more on justice than on grace. We have a clear opinion about what we deserve, and we also have a strong sense about what others deserve.

Like He does in the parable for today, Jesus challenges that thinking. He wants us to take a closer look at our preference for justice over grace. The workers who had spent all day in the vineyard wanted justice: *"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!"* "You're treating us the same," they said. "But we are clearly not the same."

It isn't really that the vineyard owner was against justice. He said to one of the grumblers: *"Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?"* He had kept his promise. He had not cheated those workers in any way. But he also wanted to be gracious to those who had worked only a little: *"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?"*

So this really wasn't about justice. This was about jealousy. The full-day workers couldn't bear the thought that others should receive the same payment who had not endured what they had. *"There are blisters on my hands! My back hurts! My skin is burned! And those guys are just going to skip in here and get rewarded for nothing!"*

The full-day workers did not have to be resentful. They could have simply been thankful for what they received. They could have even been happy for those late-coming workers, who for whatever reason weren't present when the vineyard owner first came.

The same goes for you and me. It is a common temptation from the devil to make us resentful and jealous toward others. *"If only I had the job he has and lived in a house like theirs."* "If only

I had the marriage she did and the family they enjoy." "If only I were healthier like they are." "If only I hadn't experienced so many losses and still had the encouragement and support of parents and grandparents like they do."

But the grass is never as green as it appears on the other side of the fence. We often don't see or know about the struggles and pains that others have. Their life is not really as care-free as it appears. Or if they do have fewer cares, the ones they have may feel like the heaviest burdens. It is no good for us to be jealous of the life that others have. God did not give you that life. He gave you the one you have.

But is it a good life? In some ways that is a hard question to answer. We can safely say that the life we live in America is already better than the circumstances of many around the world. We have plenty of food to eat. We have homes to live in. We have the freedom to make our opinions known and to worship as we please. Many people can't take those things for granted. We can, and we do.

So despite our blessings, we can always point out things that are not good about our life, things that bother us, that drag us down. If I were to ask each of you today, and if I asked myself, "Are you happy?" we might all hesitate before we answered. This life is not perfect. We can always think of something that isn't right. And it will be that way until our dying day.

But we must not let the difficult little details keep us from seeing the beautiful big picture. Instead of focusing on the good things that others seem to have, instead of focusing on how hard our work is, it is important to remember how we got here in the first place. We do not own this world, and we did not establish the Church. We were called to life through the miracle of conception, and we were called into the Holy Christian Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. We were born by the power of God, and we were born again by His power.

The workers in the vineyard would have ended the day with no money at all if the vineyard owner had not come looking for them. And see how eager he was to find workers! He went out again at the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour, and even the eleventh hour! No employer would bring in a worker who would be there for only one hour. It would probably take that long just to get him situated.

This is how much our Lord cares and how diligently He seeks sinners for salvation. When He called Matthew the tax collector to follow Him, the Pharisees and scribes grumbled that Jesus and His disciples were eating with such people. Jesus said, "*I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance*" (Luk. 5:32). Later He visited another tax collector, Zacchaeus, and there was more grumbling. And Jesus said, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luk. 19:10).

Jesus came to save sinners. That should be supremely comforting to you, because you are one. Jesus came to redeem you from your sins of bitterness and jealousy when you do not get what you think you deserve, or when others receive more than you think they should. He came to forgive you for the times you have been angry with God, when you felt He did not treat you like He should have.

Jesus died for all your sins because He is gracious. He gives you what you do not deserve. You don't deserve to set foot in His vineyard. You don't deserve to wear His name which He put on you at your Baptism. You don't deserve to eat and drink His body and blood in the Holy Supper. But the Lord has called you to have all of this.

By nature we were standing idle in the marketplace, living the life that suits us, piling up wrong after wrong. But "the Holy Ghost has called [us] by the Gospel" (Luther's Explanation to the Third Article of the Creed). By the power of His Word of grace, He called us away from our idleness, away from our self-centeredness, away from our futility. He called us to find life in Him and goodness and strength and purpose. He called us to meaningful and blessed work that is carried out in our vocations—our callings in our homes, our communities, and our congregation.

All of this is by grace. None of us deserves it. Jesus has chosen us to "be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness" (Explanation to the Second Article). This is how much He loves us. He chose you, and He chose me. That's all that matters.

We do not "*begrudge [His] generosity*" toward others no matter what hour they are called to the vineyard or what blessings they receive. We know we haven't deserved any of this ourselves. **Jesus Chose Us by His Grace**, and He promises to reward us by His grace with eternal life in heaven. So we give thanks to Him, and we glorify His name.

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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