

Septuagesima Sunday – Pr. Faugstad sermon  
St. Matthew 20:1-16: “Have You Been Properly Paid for Your Labor?”  
February 5, 2023 | 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.)*

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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. (Joh. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who chooses to give what belongs to Him to those who have not earned it and do not deserve it, dear fellow redeemed:

If you have ever baled hay, butchered chickens, shoveled out a barn by hand, or even weeded the garden, you know the difference between a full day of work and about an hour of work. And I expect you have had the experience of working hard at something and then having

someone stop by to help when the work is almost done. You would rather they didn't help at all instead of acting like they had been part of the crew all along.

You can imagine how the workers in our parable felt after putting in a full day. Of course they expected to receive more than the latecomers! But the foreman paid everyone the same. What a shock this was! The latecomers were shocked to receive so much for so little. And the full-day workers were shocked to receive the same as the latecomers. Jesus' parable shocks us too.

But there are some details that Jesus leaves out. He tells us how long the workers worked, but He does not tell us how well the workers worked. We naturally assume that the ability and effort of all the workers was about the same. But that isn't necessarily so. It could be that the workers who spent the whole day in the vineyard were the poorest workers while the ones hired last were the best.

Think about your own experience. Have you ever seen one employee do more in an hour than another employee does in a day? Or is it always the case that the workers with the longest tenure somewhere are always better than the workers who are relatively new? Quantity does not equal quality. Just putting in the time does not mean that higher compensation is deserved.

We don't know who the best workers in the vineyard were. Jesus does not tell us. His point, which He makes right before today's reading and at the very end of it is that *"the last will be first, and the first last."* He says that those who expect to receive the most from God will receive the least. And those who expect to receive the least will receive the most.

So what will you and I have? Jesus' parable is a picture of the members of His Church. We have been called away from our idleness in the world and have been put to work in the Lord's vineyard. Many of us here have been in the vineyard a long time. We were brought into God's kingdom through our Baptism when we were babies, and we have remained in the kingdom by faith in our Savior.

Being a part of this kingdom has required some sacrifices. The all-day workers said they had *"borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."* We bear the burden of the curse of sin brought on by Adam and Eve. There is pain in child-bearing and child-rearing, conflict in relationships, difficulties in our jobs. And the devil, the world, and our own flesh are opposed to righteousness and a life of humble faith. Their pressure and persecution can seem like a scorching heat that we will not be able to endure.

So then the longer we do endure, the more we expect we deserve. But as soon as we start thinking about what we deserve from God, the less productive we are in our work. You've had co-workers like this. They spend the entire shift telling you how badly they are treated by the boss, how much more they should be paid, and how much they hate the work. And all along, you think to yourself: "I know why the boss gets tired of you. I know why you aren't getting a raise. And I know why you are so unhappy at work. It's because of YOU!"

Now it certainly can be the case that your boss is not qualified, that you should receive better compensation, and that your work is no fun. But even if those things are true, you can make the most of it, give it your best, and thank God for what you have. You and I don't have to grumble

and complain. We don't have to point our fingers. We don't have to focus on what we don't have; we can focus on what we do have.

What do we have? We have a place in the vineyard, a place in the kingdom of God. There is work to be done in the kingdom, but everyone who was invited to the vineyard went. Work in the vineyard was obviously better than sitting hungry in the marketplace. Being a member of the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, is obviously better than wasting away in the world, choking on the cares, riches, and pleasures of life, watching the shadow of death creep closer.

It is a great gift to be invited to work in the vineyard, to be called by the Gospel. God did not call you into His kingdom because of your impressive qualities, your amazing work ethic, or your great potential. He called you into His kingdom because He is merciful. What does the all-powerful, all-holy, all-knowing God need from you? He did not call you to believe because of what you could give Him. He called you to believe because of what He wanted to give you.

And what did He want to give you? One denarius. A denarius was a good day's wage. But it is not the amount that matters here. What matters is that this wage is given no matter how much or how little one works. But isn't that like communism? And what happens in communism when compensation is not tied to labor output? Everyone does less work, since they are all going to get the same anyway. Isn't that what would happen to the vineyard owner the next day? Everyone would linger in the marketplace until the end of the day knowing they would receive the same as if they would work all day.

But let's put this in spiritual terms. You could step out of the vineyard, you could step out of the church. You could set aside God's Word and follow the passions of your heart. You could tell yourself that there is always time to enter the vineyard later. Now is the time to really live and do what you want. But that is labor too. St. Paul poses this question, "*Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?*" (Rom. 6:16).

If you are not serving God, you are serving yourself. And if you are serving yourself, you are playing right into the devil's hands. He knows that if you are not with God, then you are with him. Then you are his. How many Christians do you know who are grateful for all the sinning they did in the past? Grateful for the lying, the stealing, the sexual sin, the drunkenness, the selfish decisions? No, they are ashamed about those things. They wish they had not indulged in them. Paul writes that "*the end of those things is death*" (v. 21). That's what standing idle in the marketplace and despising the vineyard gets us. It gets us death, for "*the wages of sin—what we earn by our sin—is death*" (v. 23).

But the workers in the vineyard—the members of Christ's body by faith—receive different wages. They receive the gift of grace which leads to eternal life. That is the whole point of Jesus' parable. It is not to promote communism or a new kind of business model. It is to teach us about grace. Grace is God's undeserved love. That means it is given apart from any work we do, whether we work a long time or a short time, whether we are among the best workers or the worst.

The spiritual payment we receive from God is pure grace. It is true as Paul says, that *"the wages of sin is death."* But there is more: *"the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (v. 23). The gracious payment of salvation and eternal life is yours because of what Jesus has done. It is His work – and only His work – that matters. We can make a big deal about what we have done for God. "Look what I have sacrificed for You. Look what I have borne for You. Look how well I have served You, how hard I have worked."

But it isn't our work that gets us into heaven. It is only Jesus' work. Jesus is the one who truly bore *"the burden of the day."* He humbled Himself and took all the world's sin upon Himself. He carried it to the cross and suffered the punishment for every one of our sins, every complaint, our impatience, our selfishness, our weakness. He felt *"the scorching heat"* of hell for all these sins – the eternal separation from His Father in heaven, so that we never would.

He could not be accused of going halfway with His work or wasting His time as we so often do. He applied Himself wholeheartedly to the keeping of the Law, and He presented His perfect life on our behalf to God the Father. And all our imperfections, all our laziness and grumbling, He washed away with His holy blood.

Everything comes from our merciful Lord as gift. The blessed vineyard of the Church is His. So is the gracious desire to call us out of the darkness of our sin and death to lives of righteousness and fruitfulness in His service. He dispenses to us the riches of His kingdom, not because we have earned them, but because He chose us to receive these gifts. He does not manipulate us. He does not play favorites. He does not treat us unfairly. He gives and gives and gives some more.

So **Have You Been Properly Paid for Your Labor?** The answer is "no." Jesus has not given you what you deserve for your imperfect work in His kingdom. Instead He shares His earnings with you. You have nothing, and He gives you everything. You were last, and He makes you first.

*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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