

Septuagesima  
9 January, Anno Domini 2020  
St. Matthew 20:1-16  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

This Sunday, Septuagesima, is a great transition between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. During the season of Epiphany we glory in the revelation of Jesus as the promised Messiah and during Lent we focus our attention on the culmination and completion of His Messianic work. Thus, his parable is a great transition because it so very clearly lays out the doctrine of God's grace in Christ, which St. Paul preaches in this way "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." The Savior revealed through the miracles, Baptism, and the Transfiguration, saves us completely apart from anything we have or could do. The cross of Jesus, and only the cross of Jesus, is our salvation.

We speak a lot about grace. So much so that perhaps we take it for granted. And if you're a sinner, you do. Perhaps we even grow tired of hearing about because we know that already. But the great value of grace should never be underestimated. And the temptation to despise grace is greatest WITHIN the church. That's really the point of the parable. This parable is about us, the Baptized, and the danger of believing that in any way you participate in your salvation.

But we can't lay any claim to the kingdom of God on account of our works. You aren't in the vineyard because you are more worthy or more faithful than anyone else. And you may have born the heat of the day. You may have endured great trials and tribulations. But what of it? Obeying the Law of God is the duty of all people, everywhere. We certainly aren't special because one time we happened to get it right.

The problem is that we are taught from day one to expect fairness, that fairness is the highest good and the truest form of righteousness. It's why we are uncomfortable with the idea that not everyone will be saved, that there will be people who go to hell. We think we want God to be fair so that at least the people who tried really hard would be spared. We think we have found a way for God to be nicer and more loving than He is. But to hang salvation on fairness is to hang salvation on the works of the Law. The Law is what is fair. "Do this and you

will live.” The Law gives a clear directive - love God and neighbor perfectly. If you do that, you will have eternal life. If you don’t, if you slip at all, condemnation is only fair.

Repent. Salvation by fairness is a death sentence. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We should all be condemned. We have all despised the commandments of God and rejected His promises. If we imagine that we are standing in the vineyard because we deserve to, if we believe that we have built up a credit with God because of our pure hearts and minds, then we have not listened to God’s Word and we will perish.

The invitation into the vineyard itself was an act of grace. That you have heard the good news that Jesus died for you, that you have been clothed in the baptismal gown of Christ’s own righteousness, that you have been received at the Lord’s table and feast on the true Bread of heaven - all of these things are gifts, pure and simple. These things were done to you, for you. You didn’t earn them. God didn’t bestow them upon you in view of future faith or good works that you would do. They are gifts from God freely and joyfully given to any who will receive them.

What we deserve, what is fair, is God’s wrath and judgment. What we deserve is for God to withdraw His hand from us completely and let us taste the bitter absence of His care for all eternity. What would be fair, what we have earned by our doubt, our unbelief, our lovelessness, and our idolatry is to bear the full weight of all our sin alone.

But, praise be to God, that isn’t how the kingdom of God operates! God isn’t fair. If He was, there would be no Jesus. No Baptism. No opportunity to confess our sins and be forgiven. The master of the heavenly vineyard is a merciful and compassionate God who wants to be generous, foolishly generous, with what belongs to Him. He invites those whom the world judges to be worthless and hopeless into His kingdom. What He has to give is of no use to those who believe they can get better if they demand only what is owed them. Instead, in the kingdom of God poor, wretched, miserable sinners like us are invited freely to benefit from work that we haven’t done, from work that Jesus has done for us. He dies and we live. He is condemned and we are set free. He sheds His Blood and is abandoned by the Father and we are made sons of the living God and call upon Him as our Father.

But it remains a temptation within the Body of Christ, to imagine that we have kept the Law better, that we have believed better, than others and thus deserve a higher wage. In this way we can come to despise the very grace that raised us out of eternal death in the first place. If you find that you have grown cold to your need for forgiveness, if your conscience isn't troubled at the thought of your sins, if the sacraments are little more than ornaments on the tree of faith that can be done without, hear the words of the master to those who despised and hated that He was gracious "Take what belongs to you and go." Only the humble and repentant heart rejoices to simply be invited into the vineyard because such a heart knows that they shouldn't be there of their own merit. Only those who know that there is nothing good at all that they deserve from Christ will be motivated to take every drop of mercy and graciousness that He makes available to them, however He will give it. Nothing, absolutely nothing is more precious to the one who fears death and damnation than the promise of forgiveness and the means by which that grace and eternal life are given to them - be that the simple words of absolution, the continued proclamation of God's mercy in Christ, or the blessed Sacraments by which God saves us.

Indeed, there is work going on in the vineyard. Faith is a busy thing once it has been set free from the idle lovelessness of unbelief. There are prayers to be prayed, hymns to be sung, and gifts to be received. There are neighbors who are in need of our love and aid. But, in faith, these are a joy because they flow from a heart and conscience that are no longer saddled with the impossible burden of earning salvation. Instead they bear the light and easy yoke of Christ's love and forgiveness and rejoice to share the grace and love of Christ with all who are in need.

May God grant to each of us His Holy Spirit so that we never weary of His grace. May we never fall into the damning trap of believing that we have somehow risen above our continual need for God's grace. Instead, may we daily grow more hungry and more aware of our need. And may we, who have so graciously been invited to work in the master's vineyard, go about that work with joy firmly believing that our gracious master will freely give us what is right, the fruit of Christ's saving work which He earned for us.

In the Name of +Jesus.