

Septuagesima  
30 & 31 January, Anno Domini 2021  
St. Matthew 20:1-16  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

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

We love grace...don't we? One of the solas of the Reformation is "Sola gratia" - grace alone. Yes! Something, everything - life, salvation - for absolutely nothing. We speak constantly of the free forgiveness of our sins and proudly hold that up for all the world to see. It lies at the very heart of our confession as Lutheran Christians. We love grace - for ourselves. Even if we aren't completely honest with ourselves and we try to blunt the knife of God's holy law, we still know that we are sinners and we want God to just set those little slip ups aside and not hold us accountable for them. How great is it when we notice the cop after it's too late to slow down but he still lets us go, even though he would have been completely justified in writing us a hefty ticket? You nervously check your rear view fully expecting to see flashing lights. But grace! And then we feel justified to keep on speeding. Lord, I a poor, miserable sinner confess all my sins and iniquities to You. But we both know I'm not really THAT bad. Sure, I made some mistakes this week but I also did some pretty selfless things that I hope You noticed. They should just about balance each other out, right? They should buy me some leniency. Sola gratia, remember?

But do we love grace for others, for those real sinners? Are we as happy that the cop didn't pull over that guy that just sped past us and cut us off? Do we like the same grace for him? Do we rejoice at the thought of complete mercy being shown to the most vile person we can imagine - the mass murderer, the politician who happily sacrifices us for his own benefit, the thugs who go out and murder for pleasure just to prove their worth to their gang? Do you really believe that God should just wipe away their guilt and grant them the same eternal life he grants you? The truth is we don't. We think they should get a different grace - grace with at least some punishment - or no grace at all. We've tried to be better. We didn't do the wicked things they did (though we thought about it). We've borne the work of trying to keep the commandments. Of course we deserve more than them.

Repent. The workers invited into the vineyard at the start of the day, itself a gracious act of the master, hated the idea of a generous master who gives away his own things. But it's not as though the workers were knocking down the door looking for a job, submitting resumes, and sitting down for interviews. The master

came and found them and said “Come and work in my vineyard and I will give you a denarius.” But leave it up to sinners and they will find a way to turn a gift into something they deserved. You were just as dead and condemned before the Lord came and found you as those whom you judge to be worse sinners and less worthy of salvation. Had the Lord not come and found you, you would have perished under the same eternal wrath as them. Like them, you began outside the vineyard, outside the kingdom of God. That doesn’t mean you started out morally neutral. You were evil. It is as we sing in that glorious Baptismal hymn “All Christians Who Have Been Baptized” - “You were before your day of birth,/Indeed, from your conception,/Condemned and lost with all the earth,/None good without exception./ For like your parents’ flesh and blood,/Turned inward from the highest good,/You constantly denied Him.” Do you believe God when He tells you that EVERY inclination of YOUR heart is evil and not just some? Do you believe God when He tells you that you were DEAD in YOUR trespasses and sins in which YOU once walked? Or do you consider your sin to just be a minor flesh wound? Do you believe Christ when He tells you that you can’t do even the slightest good thing without Him enabling you to do it? You needed the same exorbitant, ridiculous, seemingly foolish grace to save you as child abusers, murderers, architects of genocide, and devil worshippers.

But the good news, the great news, is that that is exactly the grace that the Lord has shown to the whole world! The grace of God defies all logic. It is completely unreasonable. That is why our flesh hates it and tries to confine and limit it. You can’t appreciate the magnitude and necessity of Christ’s sacrifice if you don’t believe that you too are a terrible sinner who doesn’t deserve the slightest good thing from God, let alone that He should take every last ounce of your guilt, every last one of your sins, and cast them all behind His back. More than that, lay all of them - yours, mine, every last person born of flesh and blood - on His beloved Son and let Him suffer and die for them! And nothing is asked of you in return. You are not required to contribute something to it. You don’t have to finish the last little bit in order to show your sincerity. It is a devilish doctrine to say in the name of Christ that Christ paid off your original guilt but you have to work off the guilt of your actual sins. That’s not grace...at all. That merit. That’s works righteousness pure and simple. And God hates that. It kills you and robs Him of the glory due His Name.

You have received from the Lord Jesus grace upon grace, a cup overflowing with the mercy of God that is infinitely more than enough to cover your guilt, Hitler’s guilt, Manson’s guilt, Pharaoh’s guilt - all of it. And not only has God prepared the mercy by sacrificing the Lamb, He gives it away. He seeks out people to give

it to. He doesn't wait for you to come looking for it. He finds you and saves you. He finds you covered in the filth and stain of your sin and washes you in Baptism, cleansing you in the crimson flood of the Blood of His Son. There is nothing for us to do but confess and even that is shabby, incomplete, filled with sin and doubt. No matter. Your work isn't the point. God's work is. He forgives all that you confess and everything else, even things you aren't aware of. Not because of your sincerity or promises to reform. But because He is truly that generous with His mercy, because He truly desires your salvation and takes absolutely no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He was saddened at the unbelief of the workers who begrudged His mercy. He took no pleasure in casting them out of the vineyard. God too rejoices with all of heaven over that one sinner who repents.

Do not begrudge God His mercy because that is the mercy that saved you. Do not deny to others the grace that you need. Do not withhold forgiveness or it will be likewise withheld from you by your heavenly Father. Rejoice and give thanks to God that He did nothing less than all that was needed to save you. Do not imagine that the grace that once lifted your dead corpse out of death is something you deserved and someone else should have to earn. You do not want to hear those most terrible words "Take what is yours and go. Leave my vineyard. Go back into the darkness and death that your precious works have earned you. These poor sinners who confess that they have brought nothing to the table and have no works to be rewarded and believe that what I have given they don't deserve will inherit my vineyard and work in my vineyard not as servants, but as my dear sons."

True, unfettered, illogical grace is what you need. It is what every sinner needs. And true, unfettered, illogical grace is exactly what God has shown you in His Son, Jesus Christ. He washed you. He feeds you. He forgives you. Do not begrudge God's mercy for yourself or for anyone else, no matter how evil you think you or they may be. Rejoice in the Lord's generosity who has mercifully invited you into His vineyard so that you may have a share in His gracious kingdom.

"Salvation unto us has come/By God's free grace and favor;/Good works cannot avert our doom,/They help and save us never./Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone,/Who did for all the world atone;/He is our one Redeemer."

In the Name of +Jesus.