

Septuagesima

13 February, Anno Domini 2022

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 sacrificial work of our Lord. Thus, this 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, through His Baptism, and by the Transfiguration, saves us completely apart from anything we have or could do. And Jesus does this by His atoning death and His resurrection from the grave.

We speak a lot about grace. So much so that perhaps we take it for granted. And if you're a sinner, you most certainly do. Perhaps we become bored with it, tired of hearing, maybe even tired of receiving it because we know that already. But the great value of grace and our daily need for it should never be underestimated. And perhaps the temptation to despise grace is actually greatest WITHIN the church. That's really the point of the parable. This parable is about you, the Baptized, and the danger of believing that somewhere in the working out of salvation, you have played a role, even if only a very small one.

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 and condemn every last one of us to eternal judgment. The Law is what is fair. "Do this and you will live." The Law gives a clear directive to love God and neighbor with a pure heart all our lives. If you do that, you will have eternal life. If you don't, if you slip at all, fairness says that you must be condemned.

Repent. Salvation by fairness is a death sentence for all who cling to it. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We should all be condemned for we have despised the commands 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. In truth, there was really nothing that important that could be earned. That you have heard the good news of the Gospel, 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. Nor did you ask the Second Person of the Holy Trinity to be incarnate and to bear the full guilt and punishment of your sin. Not a one of us deserves any of these eternal treasures.

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 cast us into the outer darkness and let us taste there 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 ourselves alone the full weight of the guilt of all our sin.

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 man 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 because 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 than others and thus deserve a higher wage. In this way we can come to despise the very grace that raised us out of the pit 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 have tasted the bitter and hopeless despair of realizing how selfish they are and filled with all manner of evil will rejoice that salvation is not for those who believe themselves worthy, but for those who know that they most certainly are not. 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, whenever and wherever it is offered. 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 Christ seals His promises of mercy.

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 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. 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 accomplished for us.

In the Name of +Jesus.

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus.