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St. Matthew 20:1-16
Septuagesima
February 17, 2019

In the name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The point of the parable is that grace is undeserved. The parable itself presents such a well-known Lutheran teaching: we are justified by grace alone. This is what the Bible teaches. What is presented to us in this parable is a summation of the entire corpus of Holy Scripture—that we are justified by grace alone on account of Christ alone and by his atoning sacrifice that he offered to God on the cross. By this, God gives undeserving sinners freedom and relief from sin, death, and the devil.

What we deserve is the opposite of grace. Because of sin and unrepentant hearts that are turned away from God, we deserve to be alienated from him, rejected by him, and sentenced to eternal damnation—to the place of torment prepared for the devil and his angels—a place of temporal and eternal punishment. That would only be fair.

But God is not fair. Rather, he is good. Before the fall into sin man deserved nothing from God but even in paradise he bestowed grace in abundance. Adam did not deserve to be created, he did not deserve to be given Eve, his wife and helper, and after the fall he did not deserve the promise of salvation by which Jesus would crush the head of the serpent. Man did not deserve these same blessings. Man did not deserve to be saved. Likewise we do not deserve to receive the blessings and gifts of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Yet out of God's goodness he gives us these things though they are not rightly ours. God is good.

This is what the parable is about—a master of a house bestowing blessings and giving to his laborers what he says is, “right.” First he goes and hires out workers to work in his vineyard and agrees to pay them what is right—a denarius: the equivalent of a day’s wage for a day’s work. And this was indeed difficult work. The laborers in the vineyard must dig, prune, and fertilize all day long in the scorching heat. The conditions are not great. But they know will receive from the master of the vineyard what he has promised them.

But realizing that the work is too abundant and that more help is needed, the master of the vineyard goes not once but three more times at the third, sixth, and ninth hours in order to hire more workers. Finally, he goes out once more at the eleventh hour and finds still others standing around.

Our ESV translation translates the Greek word used here as “idle.” That the master of the vineyard says to these men, “Why do you stand here *idle* all day?” But that translation simply will not do. What the word (ἀργός) really means is lazy—one who is shunning the labor which one ought to perform. These men despise work. It may be tempting to view these men as victims—but they are not. They are perfectly able to work, perfectly able to give their time and talent. They have the capability but they refuse to do so. As a result, no one hired them.

But the master of the vineyard is good. He knows that these workers have been passed over by other employers on account of their laziness. Yet he tells them, “You go into the vineyard too.” And he promises to pay them “what is right.”

Now at the close of the day, when it is time to distribute the wages, problems arise. The master of the vineyard orders his foreman to call everyone together and to pay the laborers—last to first. The ones who were hired at the eleventh hour receive a denarius—pay for a full day’s work even though they worked one hour. Of course the laborers who had worked the full day complain. They see that the others have been given a full day’s wages for less work. Then they receive their own denarius; they complain, “Surely we should receive more! These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have born the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” “How dare you treat us in this way. This isn’t fair!”

Instead of trying to justify himself or arguing with those laborers, the master of the vineyard reminds them of the agreement that they made earlier. He assures them that he has done them no wrong. “Did you not agree with me for a denarius?” he asks. The master of the vineyard has the authority to give from his wealth, as he wants. He gives to the last worker as he gives to the first. He is allowed to do what he chooses with what belongs to him.

Therein lies the problem. When we turn from God to look at what he has bestowed on others and our focus shifts, we become angry and envious. We observe that while we are laboring through the scorching heat of this world, through burdening labor, the Law, and sin, others have it better than we do. We ourselves desire to be gods because we would be the best gods. Surely we would know how to dispense goodness, mercy, and earthly blessings in true fairness. But all of it would be in vain. And we would surely fail.

God is not fair and thank goodness for that. Thankfully we do not have a fair God who gives us what we really deserve—temporal and eternal punishment. The Apostle Paul says that the wages we truly deserve for falling short of the glory of God is death.

God does no wrong to us. He gives us the day's wage though we worked an hour. He gives us what we do not deserve. He bestows grace and mercy, eternal life, and salvation. He does so in such great abundance that he is the one that takes the loss!

Of course it does not make sense that the master of the vineyard would pay a full day's wage for one hour of work. That doesn't make financial sense nor is it fair to those who have been laboring the whole day. It is certainly not a method or practice that would keep the master of the vineyard in business for long because it looks as though he loses money. But the master of the vineyard isn't fair. He is good. God is good.

We who are lazy in keeping God's Law and shun the labor of fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things are hired by him who has labored since before the beginning of time. He loves us and he will not leave us to be left alone as laborers without employment. He hires us out and gives us what is right: his own son who labored through this earthly life and by bearing the scorching heat of hell on the cross. And at no point did he ever complain and say, "This is not fair!" Jesus experienced it all so that he would receive our wages of death and give us his wages of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

It is completely undeserved, yet he gives it all from his generosity. He is allowed to do what he chooses with what belongs to him. This is why we now begin to look to Good Friday. It is why Good Friday is called "Good." It is not called "Fair Friday" or

simply, “the Friday before Easter.” It is called Good Friday because on it God shows his divine goodness and mercy to us sinners. God is not fair, but he is good.

In +Jesus’ name.