

Matthew 20:1-16
"God is God and We're Not!"
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 20, 2020
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

During my vicarage year, one of my supervisor's favorite phrases was "God is God, and we're not!" This phrase would come up a lot during Sunday adult Bible studies when a parishioner would ask a question in such a way that it would appear that he or she was questioning the will of God.

You see, sometimes we don't understand why God does the things He does. We don't understand why God allowed this or that to happen. And when we don't quite get it, just remind yourself that "God is God and I'm not."

In fact, God Himself says just that: ***"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD"*** (Isaiah 55:8).

You see, God's plans and reasons are beyond the comprehension of us mortal human beings. He settles accounts in strange ways. In fact, in today's Gospel lesson, we hear Jesus telling us something really strange.

[The "Protestant Work Ethic"]

You may be familiar with the phrase "having a Protestant work ethic." This approach to work and life focuses on hard work, discipline, and being frugal:

- *"Work hard, and you'll be paid what you deserve."*
- *"Don't spend more than you make."*

In the workplace of the civil arena, this is most certainly true. Many – *often those in the older generations* – would even say that we could use much more of that work ethic these days. They compare themselves and their work ethic against the people and work ethic of a younger generation.

God's vineyard, however, does not work that way. God's vineyard, His gracious reign in Jesus, is no place for Protestant work ethics or for disciples of Jesus to compare themselves to one another.

You see, God manages His vineyard by means of grace and mercy. When we are confronted with God's management-by-mercy, though, we sinners still pervert it with our comparing. Thankfully, that does not stop our gracious landowner Lord from His grandiose giving. Afterall, God is God and we're not!

[The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard]

Since we are so used to comparing things, God uses His parables to help us better understand the kingdom of heaven. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us the parable of the workers in the vineyard. So, let's unpack this parable.

Jesus teaches us: ***“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”*** (Matthew 20:1-2).

Now, the master of the vineyard is Jesus. As the master, He goes out to hire workers at different times of the day and He sends them into His vineyard.

First, we hear about the group of workers hired early in the morning. This would be at dawn, just before or after sunrise, so around 6 a.m. So, the first group of workers agree to the wage offered by the master. They were eager to work for the denarius, which was a day's wage. They believed that the master was very fair in proposing that wage.

Then, the master continues to hire another group of workers at the third hour, which is about 9 a.m. The master noticed a group of people who were waiting for some employment, since no one had hired them yet. So, out of the kindness of his heart, he offered them a job and said, ***“You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you”*** (Matthew 20:4). So, they went.

This group assumed that they would receive a fair wage from the master of the vineyard – for a partial day's work. Still, they trusted the master and proceeded to work in His vineyard, even if they were only expecting a partial wage.

Then, the master of the vineyard needed more laborers. So, He hired more laborers at the sixth and ninth hours, which is noon and 3 p.m. Again, these laborers were waiting to be hired in the marketplace and when they were hired, they expected only a fair wage, a partial wage.

Oddly enough at just before quitting time at the 11th hour, which would be 5 p.m., the master came back to the marketplace and found more people waiting to find someone to hire them. 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’*”** (Matthew 20:6-7).

Now, hiring workers this late in the day was in itself an act of graciousness and charity, so that these last workers would at least be able to feed their families that day.

Then, at the end of the day, the master up-ends all expectations. The master 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*”** (Matthew 20:8-9).

I’m sure that those hired last thought that the master was *very* generous. And as the laborers who were hired earlier in the day looked on, they, too, were hoping for continued generosity.

“*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’*” (Matthew 20:10-12).

Instead of being satisfied in receiving their agreed-upon wage, this group just grumbles. Instead of being content, they only compare themselves with the other workers. They think that they are better and more deserving of higher wages. They are grumbling like a spoiled child saying: *“This is not fair!”*

But, Jesus and His kingdom is not about what’s fair. Instead, His reign works by the extravagant giving of His grace.

We can all hear the voices of the workers who were hired first, but paid last, crying out, “*That’s not fair!*” After all, those who worked only an hour received the same day’s wage that they received for working all 12 hours. We fallen sinners – *like spoiled children* – often make that same lament.

The kingdom of heaven, however, does not function on the basis of fairness or equality. We hear about this in our parable: “***“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”*** (Matthew 20:13-16).

You see, Jesus chooses to be generous and give away His things – *His blood-bought, cross-won forgiveness, life, and salvation* – as He pleases. Jesus, the vineyard master, says, “***Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?***” (Matthew 20:15a)

[Our Sinful Pride]

But, what about us? Do we ever succumb to comparing and complaining? Are we often like the first laborers?

In their sinful pride, the workers hired first looked down on those who did not measure up to *their* standard.

In our sinful pride, we also often look down on people around us – at home, at school, at work, and even in the church. We believe that others do not think, act, or speak as we would expect – *as we would like*. Instead of taking the advice of others, we just ignore it, since we believe that we are always right as we have a high opinion of ourselves. Instead of loving and forgiving others, we just judge and avoid them.

Or, instead of comparing others to ourselves, we compare ourselves to others as the standard. So, when we compare ourselves with others, we often conclude that we fall short of *their* high standards. We compare ourselves to *that* other person, who we believe is a better parent, a better worker, or a better student than I could ever be. Or, we say that the other person is a better Christian than I am, because we perceive that he or she has a stronger faith than me.

We often despair that we will never measure up. We may end up concluding that God loves and blesses others more than He loves and blesses ourselves.

We even compare the people of God to worldly standards, instead of seeing others in the light of the gracious giving of *His* Gospel. We may compare our congregation to others, due to the beauty of the building, the capacity of the sanctuary, or the sound of the choir. So, if our congregation does not measure up, we despair. And, if our congregation seems to be better than others, we become proud. Or, we may compare our congregation according to our memories by thinking of a particular pastor or of the times this church was filled to capacity or of the size of confirmation classes of years' past.

When we get caught up in comparing, we begin to neglect God's concerns of proclaiming and hearing His Word – *His Law and Gospel* – and faithfully receiving His Sacraments.

[God's Ways are Different]

You see, Christ's kingdom is different. The point of the parable is that God is working in ways opposite to what we, fallen sinners, expect. After all, God is God and we're not. So, all comparisons are odious. All believers in Christ will, by grace alone, inherit the same eternal life. Why is this so? It is because the reign of heaven in Jesus is so unexpected and shockingly unlike any other reality known in the world. It's because the reign of heaven is run on a principle of reward for Christ's sake that looks like utter foolishness to sinful human creatures. The reign of heaven is like the situation described in the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

As God says: ***“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways”*** (Isaiah 55:8). In fact, God's ways are far wiser than our ways: ***“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”*** (Isaiah 55:9).

You see, God ***“desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”*** (1 Timothy 2:4). It doesn't matter to God if one becomes a Christian as a child or on their deathbed. If the person believes in Jesus and trusts in His promises, this person is saved by grace through faith in Him. Every follower of Jesus will receive eternal life solely by God's grace!

Now, how is this fair for a life-long believer and a deathbed believer to receive the same grace? It isn't fair. *Salvation unto us has come all by God's free grace and favor!* (LSB 555) ***“For 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”*** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

You see, God's ways are not our ways. Our ways are transparent. God's ways are inscrutable. Our ways are wicked. God's ways are pure. Our ways are damnable. God's ways are saving.

Thanks to God the Father's action through His Son, there is a sense in which this claim, ***“Neither are your ways My ways,”*** is no longer true. For in His mercy, God has made His way also our way – the Way to eternal life. For Jesus, the very Son of God, is ***“the way, the truth, and the life”*** (John 14:6). So, by trusting in Jesus, He leads us to eternal life!

So, just as the vineyard master in the parable absorbed the costs of paying all workers the same wage, our Lord Jesus has absorbed the full cost of our sins, including the sins of comparing, grumbling, and complaining. In His death upon the cross, our Lord Jesus made Himself last in order to make us – *by His grace* – first in God's vineyard-kingdom. Now we enjoy His eternal “day's wage” of forgiveness, life, and salvation!

We, then, live by faith in our Lord's generous giving. We all – regardless of age, ability, how long we have been Christians, or how well or poorly we labor in His vineyard – receive the same favor and forgiveness.

God also says to us: ***“Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near”*** (Isaiah 55:6). So, where is God to be found? For those who seek the LORD can be assured that they will find Him where He promises to be.

So, where is He? Where should we look? Since, God is God and we're not, He is easy to be found. He isn't hiding under a farm field. He isn't hiding in a cave. He is out in the open! You see, God always loses at the game of hide and seek. So, where shall we look? Those who seek Him in Scripture, Holy Baptism and His Supper do find Him. So, look to His Word and His Sacraments. For in His Word and Sacraments, we see Jesus *face to face* (LSB 631), who forgives our sins and gives us His free grace!

Since our Lord, the vineyard master, has first shown us His mercy and love, we live our lives showing that same mercy and love to our fellow Christians as we forgive one another when we have wronged one another.

So, if you insist on living your life constantly comparing yourself to others, our Lord's command is clear: ***“Take what belongs to you and go”*** (Matthew 20:14). Our vineyard master, Jesus, does not want grumbling among His workers. Nor does He want His workers comparing themselves with one another.

But thank the Lord and sing His praise! He does not give you what you deserve: the wages of our sin – eternal death apart from God. He does not give you what's fair! Instead, He gives you what you do not deserve, what is not fair! He gives you forgiveness and life with Him! So, we cling to our Messiah of mercy, our giving God, our lavish Lord. Life is about more than a day's wage. Life is about receiving divine favor in the Lord's generous giving. Thanks be to the Triune God – *the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit* – that He is God and we're not! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠