

Shepherd of the Springs Lutheran Church
Septuagesima Sunday
Text: Matthew 20: 1-16
Theme: *The Unfairness of Grace*

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 shall be first, and the first last. (vss. 14-16)

Today we enter the *gesima* Sundays to begin our preparation for the penitential season of Lent. Our lessons focus on how Jesus' date with the cross is going to effect our life with God - how we shall live with the Father by the three great *solas* - the *alones* of salvation: *Christ alone*, through *faith alone*, by *grace alone*. This morning, the Lord intends to clarify our understanding about the last of these: what it means to live by grace alone, a grace that is absolutely outrageous when measured by to our worldly sense of fairness. Let's look at the context of this my most favorite of Jesus' parables. Jesus has just had his unsuccessful encounter with the rich young man and indicated to his disciples that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. In response to this, Peter said to Jesus with a sense of great self-congratulation; *See, we have left everything and followed you. (Matt. 19:27)* You get Peter's drift don't you? *See how poor we have become for your sake Lord. . . . This means we are really going to get the biggest reward in Heaven . . . right?* And Jesus responds by indicating that there are going to be some big surprises on Judgment Day. He explains that *many who were first, shall be last, and the last first.*

And then to illustrate what He meant by this cryptic saying, He tells the parable of *The Laborers in the Vineyard*. What does this parable reflect about the Kingdom of Heaven, and more importantly, what does it illustrate about how it will be ruled by grace? In what sense will the last be first, and the first last? To start off, lets explain some things that the parable does **not** mean. First, this parable is not intended to put Peter down. It is not saying that rewards in Heaven will be handed out in an inverse relationship to how much we may have sacrificed in this life for the cause of Christ and His Gospel. He is not saying that the less you did, the greater the payoff in Heaven and the more you did, the less you get. The first being last, and the last first intends to illustrate something that is paradoxical about those who live by grace. At the end of the day, as the parable reflects, we all have the same. If you do the math, nobody gets more and nobody receives less.

Secondly, this parable is not talking about rewards or compensation at all. This is true even though you may be quite confident that you are hearing Jesus explain the parable in just such terms. The fact is, you only *think* that the Kingdom of Heaven is about God compensating on the basis of what you have done, if you come to the parable thinking that way in the first place. This, of course is how the rich man and Peter were thinking. And, of course, this is also the way the laborers see things in the

parable, and why most of them are offended by what happens at the end of the day. If you see the parable - and by connection the Kingdom of Heaven - as a matter of obligation - then the Lord of Heaven comes off as being unfair. And of course you would be offended, but . . . you would also be right. In Heaven, nobody gets their just deserts. Jesus is indeed revealing that the fairness doctrine does not hold sway in the Kingdom of Heaven. And *that* for the most part, is the whole point of the parable. It was never intended to deal with matters involving reward or compensation in the first place. Let's explain.

Remember, Jesus is ultimately trying to explain the reason for his date with Jerusalem. He goes there not to get from His Father what He has justly coming to him, or to see that we get our just deserts. He goes there to suffer great injustice, and to die for reasons that are completely unfair. He *will* be receiving wages, but not the fair wages of His labors; rather, the wages of what we deserve. He goes to the cross to pay for our sins. The wages of sin is death. Jesus goes both to pay those wages . . . and at the same time to receive them in our stead. From the injustice of the cross, Jesus will justify a world of sinners including each of us here this morning. The foundations of the Kingdom of God shall be laid by Jesus in Jerusalem, and they will be laid by completely undeserved grace. And while these foundations will have everything to do with God's justice, they will have nothing to do with fairness. This is the great offense of the Kingdom: in God's justice, everybody gets what they don't deserve. The impact of the parable of the laborers is to drive home this outrageous truth about what it means to receive and live in the Kingdom of God by the grace of God's justice: we all get the same, and we don't deserve a bit of it.

To really get the parable and not be offended is to come to grips with how God would answer this question: *What can you provide those who already has been given everything?* What do you give those you have already been given the Kingdom and all things added to that in abundance. The parable, in part, is God's answer to this question? God answers: *I give them their neighbors and some labor for the neighbor's benefit.* You cannot labor in God's vineyard until you are entitled to be there. You must first inherit it and all is abundance by the grace of God alone. Moreover, as the parable reflects, the issue of *when* you get there and how long you get to labor is irrelevant. No one labors to obtain grace. You only labor because you have it already. No one labors for that which by its very nature is a gift. That's absurd. Remember, the labors in the parable are told that they will be GIVEN what is right. They are *not* told that they will be fairly compensated. Thankfulness for receiving a gift, once it has been received, may involve a labor of gratitude - but it never involves fairness or compensation. Gifts by their very nature are unfair - and so it is with the grace by which we are saved. All receive the Kingdom by the same equal gift . . . the saving grace and forgiveness of Christ that comes from his passion, atoning death and victorious resurrection. There are no degrees or amounts of righteousness. From the unfairness of the cross comes the unfairness of the gift of grace. The Kingdom of Heaven treats us all unfairly because

the Father out of his great love for us treated his Son unfairly in Jerusalem. He was unfairly put to death. And we are unfairly put to life. He gets wrath, we get mercy. And all of this is explained in the parable on the principle that God is free to do what He pleases with what is His. This is good news! God is pleased to be merciful to you in Christ Jesus. Jesus is the good child and He gets the lump of coal. You have been most bad . . . you get the priceless treasure.

But yes, as the parable reflects, some labor more in the Kingdom here on earth, while others less, and some very little. Remember how Jesus described new life in Him as the branch to the vine. Only by having life in Him can we will now become fruitful. Yet, as in the parable of the sower and the seed, when the seed sprouts forth in the good soil, it brings different yields from thirty up to a hundred-fold (Matt. 13:8). So it is with us. We do not all enter the Kingdom at the same stage of life and this means that the reception of everything in our baptism comes at different times in our life. Soooo - you get the added gift of serving Christ through your neighbor at different stages of life. Nevertheless, we are all heirs of the same grace, but we inherit the Kingdom first before we begin our labors. You get life first, then labor. Nobody can labor for Christ when they are dead. You cannot receive your Christian vocation without first becoming a Christian. By grace you become Christian, and only then you are privileged by grace to labor for your neighbor in Christ's vineyard. The order of things here is terribly important. The righteous become laborers, but the laborers do not by their labors become righteous. Some receive the Lord's gift of grace early in life . . . some later, and some very late in life. But in the end when you add it up: it's the same grace, the same Kingdom, the same Savior, the same Cross, the same everything. But it all seems so very unfair! Yes it does . . . because yes, it is!!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. A-men.