

WELCOMING THE LAST

Matthew 20:1-16

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

September 24, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 20, verses 1 through 16. In this parable, Jesus reveals his system for rewards in his Kingdom. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 20, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ “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. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² 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.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This parable reveals the grace of Jesus. He is generous. He gives us better than what we deserve. And we might expect a parable about Jesus' generosity to have a happy ending, but it doesn't, at least, not for everyone. Many of Jesus' parables do not have happy endings. They reveal his grace, but they don't always end with the characters embracing that grace. And this is one of those parables ... sort of. I say, “sort of,” because this parable doesn't really even have an ending. It kind of just stops. We don't know how the first laborers received the master's words. Some of Jesus' other parables do this too. They stop before they reach a final conclusion. And it seems that Jesus does this because he wants us to see ourselves in the parable, and he wants us to examine ourselves and then determine how it's going to end. How will you receive Jesus' words?

The parable is strange, as is the case with many of Jesus' parables. It is not very realistic. It's not how any businessman would, or even should, run his business.

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Like many of Jesus' parables, this one has two different audiences. It has, on the one hand, those who have just entered his Kingdom, or even those who have not yet entered, but are being called. To them, this parable is a gracious invitation and welcome. The other audience, and this is the primary one, is the long-term citizens of God's Kingdom. To them, or we might say, to us or most of us, it is a warning and a call to welcome the last. The primary audience is Jesus' disciples.

When Jesus told this parable, it was just to his twelve disciples. In the gospel lessons this last month, we've seen a few instances of the disciples thirsting for glory. Their eyes are getting big. They've been with Jesus for a few years now. They followed him while others turned back. When Jesus enters his Kingdom, however that may be, they're hoping there will be something special in it for them. In fact, you can look back just a few verses into chapter 19 and see this. If you have a Bible open, look at 19:27. Peter says to Jesus, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" The disciples wanted to know what was in it for them, especially since they got in at the beginning.

Jesus doesn't rebuke him for the question. He actually tells them that they will sit on twelve thrones (19:28). He promised them far more than they deserved. But he also warns them that he will reward many others far more than they deserve. And he ends chapter 19 saying, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (19:30). That's almost identical to what he says at the end of the parable (20:16). So we can see that Jesus tells this parable as an answer to Peter's question.

It's a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. Most of Jesus' parables are. The term "Kingdom of Heaven" is interchangeable with "Kingdom of God." Matthew often uses the term "Kingdom of Heaven" in the same places that the other gospels use "Kingdom of God." So he's not just talking about heaven, as in the place God's saints go when we die. Jesus is talking about the way he rules over his Kingdom, here on earth and in heaven forever. When Jesus came in the flesh, the Kingdom of Heaven came to earth (Matt. 3:2; 4:17), and it has remained on earth, even after his ascension, because he has promised to be with us always (Matt. 18:20; 28:20).

In Bible study on Wednesday nights we've been talking about the congregation, and how "the congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth." That's the first fundamental principle of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations. We say this because the congregation is where King Jesus reigns through his Word and Sacraments. It is here, through these means, that Jesus forgives our sins and binds us together as his body. Therefore, we say that "the congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth." And we mean this congregation. Any congregation where the gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are rightly administered, that is the Kingdom of God, and Jesus is reigning over it.

So it took me until now to see this, but I finally did, because we've been talking about this on Wednesday nights: this parable applies to the congregation. Jesus isn't just talking about how we welcome new Christians in general. He's talking about how we welcome them into the congregation, this congregation. And he's not just talking about our reward or status in the new creation, but he's talking about the gifts we receive in this congregation, and the status of believers in this congregation. This congregation is God's vineyard.

Jesus is the Lord of the vineyard, and this parable reveals how he manages his vineyard, here on earth and in heaven forever.

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It starts normal. A master goes out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard (20:1). This was a common practice in ancient Israel. You could go to the marketplace and hire day laborers to work for you. The typical work day was twelve hours, from about 6 am to 6 pm. And the typical wage was one denarius. That was considered a day's wages. So everything is fair and normal. The master makes an agreement with these first workers, and everyone is going to get exactly what they want.

It starts to get a little strange when the master goes back to the marketplace to hire more workers. He goes at the third hour. That is, the third hour of daylight, so about 9 am. And he does it again at the sixth and ninth hours, which would be roughly noon and 3 pm. With these workers, he makes a vague agreement: **"You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you"** (20:4). So what is right? They're probably thinking something prorated, like three quarters of a denarius, half a denarius, or a quarter. But they'll have to wait to the end to find out.

We already wonder if something is off with these guys. Where were they earlier? That's when masters hired workers. If you want a job, you have to show up on time. Had they been there at 6 am, they would have been hired then. Those hired at noon were apparently not there at 9 am, and those hired at 3 were apparently not there at noon. And Jesus describes them as "idle" (20:3).

It gets really fishy when the master hires more workers at the eleventh hour. The master calls them out for their idleness. He says, **"Why do you stand here idle all day?"** (20:6). They say, **"Because no one has hired us"** (20:7). Think about that one, detective. True or false? I'm going to say false. If they had been there all day, waiting to get hired, they would have been hired any of the previous four times this master went to the marketplace. No. These are the guys who don't leave the house until 4:30, and only then because their mom comes home at five, and they don't want her to know they didn't do anything all day. And the master knows they weren't there before. But he says, **"You go into the vineyard too"** (20:7). This is an even vaguer agreement than he made with the previous workers. He doesn't promise to pay them anything. He just tells them to go to the vineyard. And they go.

One hour later, when the day is spent. The master gives instructions to the foreman. He lines them up in reverse order, last to first, and gives each worker a denarius. It must have been quite a surprise to those hired later in the day, and especially to those hired at the eleventh hour. But those hired at the eleventh hour don't know what happens with the first workers. They get their denarius and go home. Their moms will be so proud.

Those hired at the third, sixth, and ninth hours apparently don't complain about their denarius. They might have thought they deserved more than the last workers, but they still got more than they expected. Five minutes earlier, they expected a quarter, a half, or three quarters of a denarius. They're happy enough.

But the first workers are mad. When they saw the latecomers get a full denarius, they expected more. The master set them up for this. If he had paid the first workers first, they would be on their way home, happy with their denarius, completely unaware of the other workers' wages. But the master did it this way in order for them to see it all. Every worker sees his generosity, even if they despise him for it.

So what's the point? This isn't a business lesson. It's about the Kingdom of Heaven. It's about this congregation.

The first workers didn't understand the mission of the vineyard. They assumed, at the beginning of the day, that the mission of the vineyard was to grow grapes, most of which would

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be turned into wine, and sold for a profit. And that's a natural assumption. Every business exists to make a profit, regardless of what they say. But that was not the mission of this vineyard, and it is not the mission of the Kingdom of Heaven. The mission of the vineyard was to bring laborers in and give them a denarius. The harvesting of grapes, production of wine, and profit was all secondary. We wonder, given the master's generosity, if he made any profit at all. The master just wants to fill up his vineyard and give away his money.

It's a foolish way to run a business. What will happen the next day? Maybe those who worked a full day won't show up at all. Maybe they'll go somewhere else where they feel more appreciated, even if the pay is the same. And maybe more workers will show up at the eleventh hour, instead of the first. Maybe they will abuse the master's generosity. Or maybe they won't. There are two ways this could go. They might stay lazy, taking the master's generosity for granted. Or they might be moved with gratitude. Maybe they will want to give this master an honest day's work.

Having received Jesus' forgiveness, how do you respond to him? He shed his blood to redeem you from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Do you desire to continue in sin, taking Jesus' forgiveness for granted? Or do you desire to serve him in loving obedience? Now, you will commit more sins, and Jesus will forgive you. But I think you actually want to serve and obey him. We obey him, knowing that he deals with us according to his grace. Our obedience earns us nothing with Jesus. But we serve him, because he is generous to us.

This is what the first workers did not understand about the vineyard, and we might not understand this about Jesus' Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven does not exist in order to serve Jesus. It's the other way around.

Maybe you've been a Christian your whole life. You might feel like you've served Jesus since childhood. He must be really pleased with you. Maybe you've been a member of this congregation since its founding, or your entire life, or at least a really long time. Perhaps you feel like you deserve special honor for your years of faithful service. And I say this, not because I see it in any of you. But it may be hidden beneath the surface, where I can't see it. Do you feel dishonored when new people come into the Kingdom of God, and they are treated the same as you?

I think we all would say that we want the Kingdom of God to grow. And we want our congregation to grow. And I think we are all sincere in that desire. But there might be an unconscious fear that the addition of new people threatens our personal honor. What does it mean when someone new comes? They might sit in your pew. So far, it hasn't happened to me here, but it might happen to you. You walk in, and someone you don't know is in your pew, and you don't know what to do. That's the typical joke at church. Most of us even have our usual parking spaces. And that's not a bad thing. It happens because we are a family. At our house, I have my spot at the dinner table. And if my kids take it, I make them move. I always park on the right side of the garage, and my wife always parks on the left. We develop these habits, because we are a family. It is good that you are here often enough to have a regular pew and a regular parking space. And we can adapt when someone new takes our spot. That's easy enough to deal with.

The harder thing is when someone new divides the honor or attention that we used to get. I think we are all sincere when we say that we want new people to come. We especially want unbelievers to come, to trust in Jesus, to be forgiven, and to become part of our family. But there might be an unconscious fear that new people will threaten our status or the status quo. We feel

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like we've earned our place. But we do not earn our place in the Kingdom of God. It is given to us by Jesus.

So what is the mission of the congregation? And what is your place in that mission? It is to build up and extend the Kingdom of God. That means to disperse the forgiveness of sins through Word and Sacrament, so that sinners will be saved. That is the purpose of God's Kingdom. It's the purpose of the congregation. God has called you to this congregation, not to extract service from you in exchange for a reward. That's how the first workers thought of the vineyard, and they were wrong. God calls you here in order to give you his grace. That was the purpose when you first came here, and it is still the purpose. God desires to forgive you here. And he desires to forgive others. We should invite all people to join us. So any service you do in the congregation is not to get a reward. You already have your reward. All service is for the sake of others, so that they, along with you, will hear and receive Jesus' forgiveness through Word and Sacrament. We should want all the latecomers we can get. We should want the lazy. We should want the sinful. We should want the unbelievers. Because our Lord Jesus Christ wants them. We all came into Jesus' Kingdom the same way: sinful, rebellious, dead, and unbelieving. The Holy Spirit called us through the Gospel, and we want this for all people.

You are received into the Kingdom of God because Jesus bled and died for you. He atoned for your sins, and he rose again. Now he calls you to come. Receive his mercy. Enjoy his vineyard. Live. Work. Rejoice. This is his will for all people. So do not begrudge his generosity. The latecomers are not beneath you. The early laborers are not above you. You receive your reward because Jesus is gracious. He only desires to fill up his Kingdom and give away forgiveness and life. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.