

Whatever Is Right I Will Give You

Matthew 20:1-9

(Sermon adapted from a sermon by Rev. Brian Hamer, Redeemer Lutheran, Bayside, NY)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

He was going to a high-profile trial for “cooking the books.” He’d began the vineyard with some grapes on the clothesline in the backyard, it had grown to take up hundreds of acres. His vineyard had earned a notch on the DOW, Nasdaq, and become a Fortune 500 company. But then a scandal, an accusation of unfairness, and his company’s stock tanked. And all he had to say at the press conference before his trial was, “The last will be first, and the first last.” We are speaking, of course, of the owner of the vineyard in today’s Gospel lesson.

It is a strange vineyard where the last are first and the first are last. But that’s the way God deals with us: not in fairness, but with righteous judgment and outrageous grace.

A vineyard owner goes out one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He has a vineyard full of grapes, ripe for the harvest, and there is a snap freeze coming – the grapes need to come in today or they will be ruined. So the owner goes to the local union and hires every available worker, agreeing with them for a denarius, a typical day’s wage for manual labor. When he looks over his vineyard, he realizes that the faithful workers have barely made a dent in his vast crop of grapes. So, about 9:00 in the morning, he gets in his truck and goes to the local street corner where non-union workers are waiting for hire. The terms this time are vague — “Work in my vineyard, and I’ll give you whatever is right.” This would not satisfy the local union, but these are just guys on the street corner who probably don’t want a W-2 so they don’t have to declare it on their taxes. So, off they go to work in the vineyard. He does the same thing at noon, and at 3:00 in the afternoon.

But it’s still not enough manpower for the plentiful harvest. At 5:00 the sun is starting to sink in the West and there are still grapes to pick. If they are overnight with this freeze, the crop would be destroyed and his business ruined. So he heads to the local tavern where he discovers — how shall we say? — a few unsavory sorts. Not the cream of the crop, but maybe they’ll put in one hour of work. And they, too, go to work in the vineyard.

It is a great harvest, it appears all the crop is in. Evening comes, the union bell rings promptly at 6:00 p.m., and the workers line up to receive their pay. (Recall from Leviticus that workers must be paid for their work at the end of the day.) The owner instructs the foreman, “Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.” This is unusual practice. Most owners would start with the first and then work their way to the last.

But what is really outlandish is what they get paid. One of the guys from the bar who only worked for one opens up his envelope as he’s walking past those still waiting to get paid, and discovers he received what was promised those hired at the beginning of the day - a denarius - a full day’s wage.

Some of those waiting, of course noticed. They saw that the last had received a full day’s wage, and the news spread. Human nature being what it is, some got this great idea in their head as they

started doing the math. If he got a denarius for one hour's work, then those who worked a $\frac{1}{4}$ of the day figured they'd get 3 denari, the $\frac{1}{2}$ day workers would get 6 denari, the $\frac{3}{4}$ day workers figured they'd get 8 denari (8 days wages), and "oh glorious day," the ones who worked all day would get 12 denari (12 days wages for their day's work).

But it soon became obvious that the owner of the vineyard was paying everybody the exact same amount.

In the midst of their anxious score-keeping, the workers had not factored in one important thing, the owner's abundant grace. He is not paying them based on their work, their education, or their merit. Rather, he is paying them based on His own goodness and mercy.

"Not fair!" cry the sweatiest, twelve-hour workers. "We've knocked ourselves out in the heat for the whole day, and these deadbeats only worked for one hour! You made them our equal in pay! Not fair!" But the owner will hear nothing of it. He basically replies, "Did you not agree to work for me for a denarius? Did I not give you what I promised? If I want to give a full day's wage to some eleventh-hour deadbeats, and throw away my money, isn't that my business, not yours?"

This is a grace-based mentality. He is the owner and he is allowed to do as he pleases with what belongs to him. That is how "the last will be first, and the first last" in this peculiar vineyard of judgment and grace.

Jesus is of course *not* giving a lesson on how to run a business. Jesus was not an example-setter. He is not suggesting some form of socialism, so do not rush back to work tomorrow morning and insist that everyone be paid the same thing regardless of education, experience, or job performance. This parable does not teach us how to run a business.

This parable teaches us about God! It teaches us to believe in righteous judgment and outrageous grace from God.

I pray that we see ourselves in this parable as standing under God's judgment when we become score-keepers in the Christian life – that is, His *righteous* judgement. One of my professors at the Seminary once told me an old proverb that went something like this: "Whenever anyone starts a sentence with the words, 'I've been a Lutheran all my life,' watch out! The next words out of their mouth will probably be heresy."

Of course, that may be an overstatement, but it is a helpful reminder that the Christian faith is not about comparing ourselves to others, nor is it about keeping track of who has been in the faith the longest, nor is it speaking of some people as having greater faith than others. Historic church bodies, for instance, who practice closed Communion out of love (and nothing could be more loving than closed Communion) have probably seen this scenario played out in their narthexes on several occasions:

Layman: Pastor, I've been a Lutheran all my life and I'd like to take Communion this morning.

Pastor: Excellent! Are you baptized, instructed, and a member of an orthodox Lutheran church body - confessing all that we confess?

Layman: Well, no, I don't believe that God will really send unbelievers to hell, I think it is

possible that Jesus might have been a women, and I am not a member of an orthodox Lutheran church anymore, but I've been a Lutheran since before you were born, young man, and I have every right to receive the Lord's Supper!

"I have every right to..." Do you see how this "I've been a Lutheran all my life" mentality can be a bad thing if it becomes an end unto itself? The gifts of the gospel — crucifixion and resurrection, word and sacrament, forgiveness and eternal salvation — are gifts, not rights. If they are rights, then they are no longer gospel.

Let us consider the owner's dolling out equal paychecks to everyone in his vineyard. God is using this parable to remind us that we are all equal under the law. Apart from God' grace, we **ALL** stand in danger of condemnation in the final judgment.

Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus describes the unbelievers in the final judgment as saying, "Lord! Lord! Open to us!" and "Lord, when did we see you hungry?" and claiming many other excuses not to be condemned. It will be too late. The day for repentance and faith in our Lord and Master is now. Now is the day of salvation! Now is the time to repent! Now is the time to get yourself and your kids out of bed and to church — and to Sunday School and to Bible Study — to see Jesus. And now is the time to bank your entire existence on God's mercy, before whose righteous judgment we are equally condemned under the law.

But the mercy of this vineyard owner preaches Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Did you notice how the times of day that the owner hires workers correspond to the hours of Jesus' Passion? Very early in the morning, Jesus was on trial, tossed to and fro from Pilate, back to Herod, and finally back to Pilate for His condemnation. At the third hour (9:00 a.m.) He was led as a lamb to the slaughter and made to carry His own cross to Calvary, where He died our death. At the sixth hour, there was darkness over all the land, that we might be delivered from the darkness of death and have the light of life. At the ninth hour, Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and yielded up his spirit, winning full and free forgiveness for the entire world. And about the eleventh hour (5:00 p.m.) He was buried, taking all of our sins into His tomb and leaving them there for eternity.

Do you see how the outrageous grace of the vineyard owner is based on Christ and His cross? There's nothing "fair" about it, so there's no sense in keeping score. It's just outrageous — the innocent One dies for the guilty, the Righteous for the unrighteous — that we might freely receive the denarius of God's mercy.

And just as the owner made good on His promise to give His workers whatever is right, so God fulfills His promise to give us the gifts of His righteousness. Whatever is right, He will give to us by His outrageous grace.

In the wake of Jesus' cross and empty tomb, He pours water on your heads three times in the name of the Trinity, and in so doing, He gives you forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. Whatever is right – whatever makes you right – I will give to you.

Baptized into His name, you make regular and salutary use of confession and absolution. You

know the Scriptural substance of the church and ministry, for it exists not to keep records, but for the pastor to place His hands on the head of the penitent and through His voice, Christ says, “I forgive you all your sins. Whatever is right – whatever makes you right – I will give you.”

Jesus takes the same body and blood once crucified for our sins and risen from the dead, and with His Word, He sacramentally unites it to simple bread and wine, placing it into your mouths for salvation. He can do whatever He wants with what belongs to Him, and He chooses to give His flesh and blood to you for your salvation. He gives it to strengthen you in the faith while it is day to preserve you steadfast in the faith until the night comes when no one can work.

It’s not fair, I say — to forgive the sins of dying sinners like you and me. But that’s our owner, our God, our Lord — truly the worst CEO in the history of business. Seriously, if the CEO of a company paid wages by what was earned, like Jesus dishes out the riches of His grace, they’d lose money hand over fist. Yet Christ is so rich in grace that He can’t help but share it with you. From baptism to eternal life and all the work you do in His vineyard in between, it’s all about God’s abundant grace to give you whatever is right – in His eyes – whatever makes you righteous.

Yes, the CEO of this vineyard would be tried and found guilty today; not for stealing the pension plans of his employees, but for righteous judgment and outrageous grace. God our heavenly Father gives us righteous judgment, condemning our sin and bringing us to repentance.

He also gives you outrageous grace; a gift so outlandish, so contrary to your expectations, that it makes those who do not have it – or who do not understand it – so envious that they lose their denarius of mercy. But for you who believe and are baptized, this abundant grace in Christ is your light and your life. It is your very eternal salvation, your denarius of God’s grace. Amen.