

Sermon Septuagesima 2020

February 9, 2020

Matthew 20:1-16

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read, the parable often called “The Generous Landowner.”

I often think of this parable, that it is one which is easy to relate to on its surface. After all, I think we’d all have a sense of indignation if we were literally those who went out and worked in a field all day and received the same payment as people who only worked an hour. I mean put yourselves in the shoes of those workers. It’s hot, it’s tiresome, it’s challenging. You see everyone in line. You see that these men who worked less than a tenth of the time you worked and they’re getting what you were told you would get. I’m sure at the least you would start to hope that this owner had a change of heart and decided to pay more. More likely, you would assume like these in the story did, that he will pay you more. And then he doesn’t. What?! What’s that?! How can he do that?!

And look at the story, look at the detail here, this is even more frustrating! Look at it. This owner goes out how many times in the day and hires people? I count five times total. At six in the morning, at nine, at noon, at three and at five. So first of all, this is looking like a twelve hour workday, and each time he’s hiring people. But the point I want to make here is that by the time he gets the crowd at five, what does he say? **“Why do you stand here idle all day?”** Why aren’t you out there working? And what’s the response? **“Because no one has hired us.”** Now, I could be wrong, but it seems like since this landowner went out five times, they would have been seen by him and hired already, doesn’t it? So, it isn’t just that you get this group hired at five that got paid for the full day, it seems like they were lazy and they hadn’t gotten their bums out there to be hired. And then they’re lying about it.

Again in the position of the twelve hour hires, you can relate, can’t you? I got myself out of bed. I put the effort in to make sure I got the full day’s work. I toiled, I labored, and that bum gets as much as me?! It’s infuriating.

And yet what’s the response of the landowner when he’s called on it? **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?** That’s not satisfying, is it? If you’re that worker, you know that you can’t argue. It’s not like you can tell this guy what to do with his money. You can’t make him pay you more.

In our day we would say that we've got the verbal contract. We've got the oral agreement. You can't sue this guy for not paying you more. You said you would work for that, he paid you that, it's done. But it's not satisfying is it? "Sure, you're right, but, but, but I'm worth more than that guy!" "I do begrudge you your generosity. I do want to tell you what to do with what is yours!"

And I love the literal translation of the Greek here. I think the phrase captures the sense but literally what the landowner says is not "Do you begrudge me my generosity," but, "Are your eyes evil because I am good?" "Are you envious of my generosity?"

And we are, aren't we? We are envious when people are generous and we think we're more deserving. We are envious that someone got the promotion and we didn't, that time our parents gave our sibling something we thought we should have and not them, or even that time our sports rivals with their quarterback who's not as good as our favorite quarterback won their sixth Super Bowl in less than twenty years. We don't like that.

Of course, this is all speaking of earthly things. As we look at this parable, what's it really about? It's about God's grace, isn't it? In fact, as I mentioned switching our lectionary last week with Transfiguration occurring then instead of the Sunday right before Ash Wednesday, a part of that is that we have today and these next two Sundays which follow something called "Pre Lent." Today is Septuagesima which means "within seventy," within seventy days before Easter. Next will be Sexagesima, "within sixty days" before Easter, then Quinquagesima, "within fifty days" before Easter. And I've heard it said that those weeks lend themselves well to Grace, the Word, and Faith. Like the Solas of the Reformation, if you remember them: Sola Gratia, grace alone, Sola Scriptura, Scripture (or the Word) alone, and Sola Fide, faith alone. So, we'll be going that way the next three weeks, but today: Grace; God's grace.

We use that word a lot, but what does it mean? Grace. I like to define it as getting good things from God we don't deserve. To contrast that, I call mercy not getting bad things from God we do deserve. But today is grace; getting good things from God we don't deserve. Or maybe you've heard it: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. That's grace right? We get the eternal riches of God's kingdom paid for by the blood of Christ. That's grace. That's generosity isn't it?

In our prayer of confession week in and week out we make that point, we deserve God's temporal and eternal punishment. As we say in the Catechism on the Lord's Prayer, we daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment. And yet God gives us His grace. He gives us His Son, bleeding for our sin on the cross, rising on Easter that we

could live forever. What a blessing! What generosity! After all, that's what this about, isn't it? God's generosity.

In fact, to make this a bit tangible, I was talking to our confirmands a few weeks ago and I asked them a question: what is more comforting? Is it more comforting for someone to tell you they love you because you've earned their love, or is it more comforting for someone to tell you that they love you even though they shouldn't? And of course our natural response is to say that love that we earned is more comforting. After all, I did what was needed to be done, and they love me because they know me, and they know all the good stuff about me. But what happens when they learn all the bad stuff about me? Then the real love has to come through. And that's the love God speaks to us: I don't love you because you're good—you're not—I love you because I'm good. Christians, what comfort. If it's up to me to earn God's love, then I have a fear I can lose it. But when I realize that God loves me because of His goodness, what security I have in that! I can be free, I don't have to worry that I'll mess it up! What comfort. And this is His grace, His generosity to us in Jesus. His generosity that He wants to give to all in Jesus.

As I say that though, I think in many ways when we think about this passage, we grasp that to an extent. I think we grasp that especially in application to others, which is the big part of that. After all, Jesus is speaking to the works righteous Pharisees here. He's speaking to those who think they can earn this favor of the landowner, of God, by their obedience and good works. But I think we get that pretty well in our context.

After all, I don't think we really trouble with the thought that someone would convert on their deathbed. I think for the most part we celebrate the thought that someone who never really believed would be like the thief on the cross and having no opportunity to earn anything by good works, would still be able to hear those words: "Today you will be with me in paradise." I think we generally appreciate stories like that, don't we?

But we still begrudge God His generosity, don't we? We don't like the idea of God not giving equally. We don't like the idea that Jesus didn't heal every leper in the towns that He visited. Or in a concrete aspect that I hear people often questioning, we don't like the idea that there could be some in the world who don't hear and so don't go to heaven. Now, don't get me wrong, that's not bad that we should want people to go to heaven. I heard it said recently that there's an aspect where as Christians we should want to think that everyone might end up in heaven because of the sacrifice of Jesus. And I think we can say on a personal level we should be able to identify with that. But the trouble comes when someone doubts God and His goodness because of it. Or it's

even more trouble when someone chooses not to believe in the God who reveals Himself in Jesus and the Scripture because of it. At that point, we're telling God what to do with His mercy. At that point we're not trusting that God is good. And to that, I have to say when you wrestle with that, don't look at what seems unfair. Look at Jesus and know that God is good, and that He has loved the lost even more than you have. In fact, look at that as an opportunity to pray for the confession of the word throughout the world. Look at it as motivation to profess your faith to those around you and to pray for opportunities to love people and tell them about Jesus that they would hear and be saved. But don't begrudge God His generosity. That's one way we can apply this.

Another is to realize that we also begrudge God His generosity when we suffer in this life. The devil always wants us to look at what God has given to others and how we don't deserve the trials we have as much as the really bad people do. And as I say this, I say it knowing some people of whose trials I am very empathetic toward them and they have confessed this to me. So I don't say this coldly. I say it addressing how we have to view this. For example, I think of one person I would have conversations with. We'll call him Bill. Bill would say to me, "I'm a good person, why is God doing this to me? I love people, I have a heart for them, why is this happening?" In other words, Bill found himself in a trial and wondering why God gave it to him and not to the thief, or the rapist, or the murderer. Why in God's generosity did He bless those people who do evil things and not Bill? And here is where the danger is. When we start to compare ourselves when the bad things happen, then we think it's because of something we've done. That's Bill, "What did I do that God put this on me?" So that's what we have to watch, how we have to apply this: not to begrudge God His generosity when we suffer.

And how can we do that? If you're in that suffering, you have to know that God gives rain to the righteous and the unrighteous, so you can't answer why you're in that trial and not someone else. But in Jesus, then you have to know that it comes from His love for you. That might seem odd to say, but that's what we see in the cross. The grace, the generosity we see on the cross. On the cross we see the One who made Himself last in His generosity so that in His Kingdom, we might be made first. On the cross we see that we are those who are the eleven o'clock workers no matter how much of our lives we've been Christians. On the cross, we see God's grace. And then we see the comfort of that grace. It's given to us that we might cling to it and to God in all things. And then we might know that it's ours. He gives it again and again and again: in baptism, in His Word, in His Supper. Grace for you, generously. The best kind that can't be taken away. Amen.