

Sermon on **Matthew 20:1-16** – 18th Sunday after Pentecost – 10.4.20
St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church – New Ulm, MN – Pastor N. Scharf

It was a hot summer day and we had just punched out at the factory where we worked. We were driving into stop and go traffic on I-94 near the Marquette Interchange. We carpooled every day to work, lifted together for football, studied together, were the best of friends since freshman year of high school, still are today, but on that car ride he finally asked and wouldn't let it go, "How much are you making an hour?" We worked at the same factory – he in shipping and I in production. I had dodged the question before, but now as we sat on the interstate in hot car after a 10-hour shift, I told him. I made about \$1.00 more an hour. You can imagine how the rest of the car ride went. Debates on whether I deserved a \$1.00 more an hour for what I did vs. what he did, what was fair/unfair, feelings of inequality, unfairness, and the like. That's why a lot of companies tell you not to share what you make with fellow employees. When it comes to wage, we have an opinion on what is fair, and rightly so. Jesus plays on this today to shake us from looking at God's grace and gifts, the work he allows us to do, and heaven in the same way we look at our jobs, compensation and the way this world works. You'll realize:

God is not fair. God is gracious.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. "He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (NIV 2011).

2000 years later we are in harvest time here in Minnesota and we are praying for the safety of our farmers and all those helping. It's not uncommon that during these weeks farmers need extra help to bring in the harvest. You hire seasonal help or seasonal work. It was just as common as in Jesus' day. The vineyard needed a lot of hands on deck during certain times. Today we hire help by word of mouth, online Facebook blast, or a temp agency. Jesus'

day, you went to the marketplace where seasonal help could be found for a fair price. 12-hour days – sunup to sundown was the norm. A denarius was the common pay for a day laborer. Jesus introduces us to a common scene, but then he changes it to make us realize that his kingdom is different from this world's.

The landowner doesn't just send his foreman, he recruits the first batch of workers. They make an agreement, today we would have an elbow bump contract of agreement during co-vid, but they were hired for a denarius for the 12 hours. But then he went out again and found workers standing idle and made no contracts, seems strange, but just the promise *"I'll pay you whatever is right."* And the workers went. And again and again he went out – to the point of ridiculousness – the 11th hour – and found workers. He chides them for being idle and sends them out to the vineyard.

There are a couple of differences between what we might expect and what we're seeing with this parable – (a parable is when Jesus tells an earthly story to teach a heavenly meaning). Now it gets different. *"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' 'The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. Odd that the one-hour workers were paid first. They were probably the least tired. If I had worked 12 hours, I would be ready to get out of there. I imagine fair would have meant that the one-hour workers would get a 12th of a denarius. So if a full day were \$120, they would get \$10. But they got the full denarius. So did the 3-hr. shift and the 6-hour shift and the 9-hour shift. Surely the 12 hour/full day/exhausted workers deserved more!*

But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' I would have complained too. C'mon! I get the same as the 1 hour worker? What gives? This landowner and his foreman are crazy. They both need to learn how the world works. This is not fair. Or maybe you and I need to learn how God works. Jesus didn't tell his disciples, *"This is what the kingdom of Rome is like, or the kingdom of America is like."* He said, *"For the kingdom of heaven is like..."*

Ask yourself, do I ever complain about what God gives me in comparison to others with word or just in my mind? Do I grumble about the workload or burdens I have compared to the light load of others? Do I feel I miss out on things because I support the Lord's work maybe more than others do who probably have more means? Do I complain about the rewards that I see God give others for their labors, or lack of their labors – when they seemingly are standing idle in the marketplace, in comparison with what he allots me? Do I grumble about the gifts and abilities he gives to others in comparison with the gifts and abilities and their measure that he gives me? Do I get angry or worried when others suffer loss or hardships even though they don't deserve it? Do I grumble against God when he lets me suffer or suffer loss? I could say yes to all these things. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Jesus calls me to repentance as one of his followers. I'm the friend Jesus addresses here, and maybe you are too.

"But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious

because I am generous? “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” The kingdom of heaven is different, isn’t it? This friend got what he deserved – no more/no less and he was told to go. He accused the landowner of being unfair when he was fair, and if the worker opened his eyes – far more than fair – he had hired him to work. And he was generous to all! But this worker gave the landowner the evil eye and was sullen and angry.

The landowner is God. We who follow our Savior Jesus are the workers. True, some sit idly in the marketplace of this world far too long before they activate and do the work God would have them do, and so God’s question, “*Why here have you stood the whole day idle?*” is rightly asked. And for the times this too is us, shirking our responsibilities in the kingdom or in our godly roles in this life, we too must say, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” But really, isn’t Jesus confronting the choir, you, you who got yourselves up and got here to church or tuned in, and do so on a regular basis, who are involved, who have made sacrifices, who pick up the crosses, who labor for the Lord in so many ways at home, in your community and here in God’s house. He confronts you lest you become like these grumbling workers who have lost the joy, constantly think they deserve more, who think that because of their works or because they turned away from sin that they deserve heaven, or are better than others. Jesus warns us and says, “*So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*” If that’s how we want it, Jesus says, “Then that’s what you’ll get. Get out of here.” We deserve to be cut loose. We deserve to be lost now and eternally.

He speaks this parable to his beloved disciples and to you and me, so we stop worrying about rewards or comparing lots as if we were saved by works or on what we deserve. Peter was worried that he wouldn’t be rewarded for leaving everything to follow Jesus. Jesus said “No, I bless you in this life and the next in an overabundant way.” Soon after this parable, John and James’ mom asked that her sons get a throne on the left and right of Jesus in his kingdom. Jesus was kind in his response and said, no, that’s for the Father to say. We foolishly think God operates like this world. We are in danger of becoming last and getting what we really deserve.

So Jesus puts this picture before us while on his way to Jerusalem. There he had his Father punish him for our grumbling, for our cries of “unfair,” for our idleness in the work he calls us to do in his kingdom, for the times we wanted our own kingdom rather than his, the one he desperately wanted us to be a part of. He suffered for us so that God says to you and me, “Forgiven. Freed from sin, eternal death, and physical death’s sting. You are mine. You are part of my kingdom. I will bless you so much in this life. Open your eyes to see. I will give you good work to do. I will bring you home to heaven when it is time.” What Grace! There are tough lessons for us to learn aren’t there? The disciples who learned this lesson didn’t have it easy following Jesus, but looking at it from where they are now, God couldn’t have treated them better. Thank God he confronts us and comforts us. Don’t stand idle. Go to the vineyard God has called you to. There is work to do. Go in joy knowing you will receive the perfect reward of his grace, not of merit, here and in eternity. Trust him as he calls you, “*I’ll pay you whatever is right.*” And smile because **God is not fair. God is gracious. Thank God.** Amen.