

October 16, 2011
Pentecost 18

"Grace Is Getting What We Don't Deserve"

MATTHEW 20:1-16

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius^[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went. "He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing.⁶ 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?' ⁷ "Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' ⁸ "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.' ⁹ "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² '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.' ¹³ "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The call goes out. "The grapes are ripe. We need workers to pick the grapes right now." The owner of the vineyard offers workers a hundred dollars a day to pick the grapes from sunrise to sunset. At nine in the morning he goes for more workers, and at noon he goes for more, and he goes for more workers at 3:00 PM. He even picks up a few more workers an hour before it gets dark. He promises to pay them whatever is right.

It is quitting time. The workers line up to receive their pay with those who worked the least to those who worked the most. Each person receives an envelope and when they open it they are surprised that each one has been given a crisp one hundred dollar bill. The vineyard workers who are bone tired, dirty, sweaty, thirsty, and covered with stains from the grapes wonder why in the world those who are hardly broke a sweat are giving the same as those who worked so hard. It just does not seem fair.

It just isn't fair is it? Here I have done so little to earn my salvation, in fact I have done nothing, nada, zilch. Yet God gives me, me a sinner who deserves to be cast off forever in eternal punishment, complete pardon and forgiveness for every sin every committed. Along with this forgiveness God gives me the treasure of his unfailing love. Here I have nothing to offer God and he gives me everything. Let's take a closer look at this story of the workers in the vineyard to gain a greater appreciation how our God in his grace and

mercy gives us what we don't deserve.

Our way is to look for some reward based on what we do

Jesus loved to tell stories about the kingdom of heaven. Here he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into the vineyard." Just what is meant by this expression the kingdom of heaven? When Jesus began his ministry it says that he went from village to village telling people the good news about the kingdom of heaven. He told us that it is our heavenly Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. He tells us in Matthew 6 to seek God's kingdom and his righteousness first and all these things will be added to us.

When you hear these words about the kingdom of God, think of your God as a king who comes to you as this mighty, powerful, majestic king who is King of kings and Lord of lords. The King comes to you, bows down to you personally, and sets before you this large treasure box filled with the greatest treasure in the world. It is not filled with gold coins and priceless diamonds and jewels or stocks and bonds. It contains the blessings of the King's love for you, unlike any love you have every known. The king earned this love for you by having his own Son die for you. His Son purchased this love for you by his innocent suffering and death for your sin.

It is part of our human way of thinking to believe that we get rewarded for what we do. That's what the people thought who went into the vineyard to pick the grapes. Those who worked twelve hours expected to get paid for twelve hours of work. And so it was for those who worked less. "About the third hour 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."

We always think in terms of people getting paid for what they do. We say of someone who does not do his job, "He is not worth his salt." Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt which was a valuable commodity in those days. We have another expression, "An honest day's work for a honest day's pay." Some of the kids in school study hard because they want to earn good grades. An elderly woman once told her wealthy friend, "You sure are blessed." The woman responded with some anger in her voice: "Blessed, what do you mean blessed! I earned my money." Even if you are good to your family cat, you may have the cat be good to you.

We are human beings who are born into this world programmed by sin to think that we can operate with God the same way that we get paid for picking grapes in the vineyard or earn good grades in school. This is our default position. The book of Proverbs says, "There is a way that seems right to man, but the ends are death." Jesus once told the story of a man who went to the temple to pray to God. Listen to how he bragged about himself, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men- robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." The Apostle Paul confessed how he once put his confidence in his own performance. He recalls his former way of thinking with these words, "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the

tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, in regard to the law a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."

There was once a brash young wood pecker who enjoyed pounding holes in trees much to the annoyance of other creatures in the forest. One day, as a storm was approaching, he was pounding away and proudly making a new hole. Lightning struck and knocked him to the ground unconscious and split open the tree. Woody came to his senses, shook himself a few times to rearrange his ruffled feathers. He looked up at the tree and proudly boasted, "My, I am good! Just look at what I did." The human heart is no different. It boasts in its accomplishments and even thinks it has the power to eradicate sin and be rewarded by God and receive the blessing of his love in this life and for all eternity.

God's way is to reward us by his grace and mercy

God's reward system works differently as Jesus illustrates with his story about the workers in the vineyard. They are expecting to receive their money based on how much they worked. What a big surprise at the end of the day! The workers line up in a row with those who worked the least receiving their money first until it came to those who had worked the full twelve hours. "When evening came the owner of the vineyard said to the foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."

How shocked they were to receive the same amount of money for each one regardless of how hard they worked. Listen to their complaint: "These men who were hired last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." The land owner defends his actions with these words, "Take your pay and go. I want to give the man 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?"

Oh please do not think for a moment that Jesus told this story to encourage teachers to give all their students "A's" however well they perform, or that all the parents in school should receive a bumper sticker that says, "My child is an honor student..." Jesus is not encouraging us to have a socialistic government where everyone gets the same wage. He wants us to realize that in the Kingdom of God, our God has every right to reward people not on the basis of their performance but his grace to them.

One of the toughest pills for people to swallow is that they are saved entirely by God's goodness and grace and not by their performance. Think of the thief who was dying next to Jesus. This was not a life long Lutheran who has spent his life in joyful service to the Lord. Here was a man who not only lived his life as thief but he joined the other thief and the crowd in mocking Jesus. In the eleventh hour of his life he turned to Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus turned to him and gave him Paradise with the words, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." I think also of the man, John Newton, who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace." He also wrote a book called "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners." John Newton knew there was nothing he could offer Jesus except a life of shame, drunkenness and working on a slave ship. Jesus had everything to offer him. There will be many with us in heaven who receive the gift of

salvation in the eleventh hour or their lives.

I once asked a non practicing Muslim if he would consider reading the Bible if I gave one to him. He said, "I have read the Bible through three times and I want nothing to do with a religion that has Jesus turning to a thief and rewarding him with Paradise." It is counterintuitive to believe that I can do absolutely nothing to save myself. It is even more counterintuitive to believe everything depends on what Jesus does for me. But that is the way it is in the kingdom of God. That is the point Jesus is making when he has the owner saying, "Or are you envious because I am generous?"

To appreciate even more that grace is getting what we don't deserve we direct your thoughts to the well known words of Romans 6:23 that tell us "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." In God's system of justice and fairness he has every right to give us what we deserve for our sin. We deserve eternal death. He gives us the blessing of eternal life. To the person who does not know about the kingdom of God this seems unfair. But, dear Christian, you know what Jesus did to earn this eternal life and eternal love of your heavenly Father for you. Every sin of my past and yours was paid for completely. He even took his perfect life along with his perfect death and put into your account. Because of Jesus your God is committed to rewarding you not on the basis of how hard you have worked but on the basis of what Jesus has done for you. As we sing in the hymn, "Your works not mine O Christ, Speak gladness to my heart."

And so in this marvelous kingdom of God Jesus tells us, "The last will be first and the first will be last." I can't hold up my finger this morning and say, "I am number one" but I can say with Paul: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst." The last shall be first. I know there is hope for me because I am the least in the kingdom of God. Grace is getting what I don't deserve. Amen.