



THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

God Operates by Grace

Matthew 20:1–16 (HCSB)

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the workers on one denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ To those men he said, 'You also go to my vineyard, and I'll give you whatever is right.' So off they went. ⁵ About noon and at three, he went out again and did the same thing. ⁶ Then about five he went and found others standing around, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?'

⁷ " 'Because no one hired us,' they said to him.

" 'You also go to my vineyard,' he told them. ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, 'Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.'

⁹ "When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. ¹⁰ So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: ¹² 'These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day and the burning heat!'

¹³ "He replied to one of them, 'Friend, I'm doing you no wrong. Didn't you agree with me on a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what's yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my business? Are you jealous because I'm generous?'

¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first last."

"The last will be first, and the first last." (verse 16) This might be because I am the product of a Lutheran Elementary School, but I know this Bible passage well because my classmates and I would use it so often when lining up for recess, lunch, bathroom breaks, dismissal – you name it. We all wanted these words of Jesus to make those people who are at the head of the line feel bad and make us in the back feel a little better.

Maybe it's because of these blatant misuses of God's Word that I had a hard time digesting the message of Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard this week. The whole idea that the first will be last and the last will be first is confusing. How can I be first if I'm last? And if I'm first, how can I be last unless the teacher pulls a switcheroo on me and reverses the line order at the last second? To understand Jesus' saying "The last will be first, and the first last," we need to consider the context in which he said those words.

In the previous chapter of Matthew, we get two real life examples of this truth. The first involves children being brought to Jesus. We're talking grade-schoolers, preschoolers, toddlers, even infants. In Jewish society at this time, children were looked down upon, and the adults took precedence. So, the disciples rebuked the children, to let Jesus focus on the important adults. Jesus immediately corrects them. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14 NIV84) Jesus placed his hands on those children and prayed for them. These last ones, the children, were ones to whom the kingdom of heaven belonged. They were first in God's eyes.

The next incident recorded is about a rich young man. This man looked like he had it all. He had money, respect. He was clean-livin' and spiritual. What more could you want out of a person? The disciples saw this man as someone who should be first in God's kingdom of heaven. But when Jesus tells him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me," (Matthew 19:21 HCSB) the rich young man went away sad because he had a lot of possessions. He wasn't about to give them up to follow Jesus. This man, who looked to have every advantage, who people thought would be first, was really last because he loved his stuff more than Jesus.

It is on this point that Peter chimes in saying, "Look, we have left everything and followed You. So what will there be for us?" (Matthew 19:27 HCSB) At first we might take Peter's comment and question as being pretty smug. But truthfully, the disciples had given up their homes and livelihood to follow Jesus. They had done what the rich man could not bring himself to do. Most people looked down on these fishermen from Galilee, this rag-tag group of disciples, and figured they didn't have a place among the elders, chief priests, and Pharisees – the important people, those who were first in societal ranking. However, Jesus tells the disciples that they will sit on thrones in judgment over them on the last day. You, who the world thinks is last, will be first.

This is when Jesus tells a parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard." (verse 1) The first people the landowner hires, he agrees with them on the wage of one denarius, which was pretty good for a day's paycheck for unskilled labor. It was better than minimum wage. The landowner goes out again at 9 am, noon, 3 pm, and even at 5 pm – one hour before quitting time – and hires more workers, telling them only that he would pay them what was right.

Then it came time for the workers to gather their wages. The last ones hired got their pay first. To the amazement of the first ones hired, they saw the last ones get a full denarius. So, those workers hired on first are rubbing their hands together thinking, “Man, if that is what he paid to those charity cases who worked only an hour, I can’t wait to see what we get for laboring all day in the heat.” Then they received their pay: a single denarius.

The murmuring started immediately; grumblings were made to the landowner: “These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day and the burning heat!” (verse 12) How on earth is it fair compensation to give people who work one hour the same wage as the people who work twelve hours? Where’s the labor union when you need them, right? The workers who were hired on first felt that they were entitled to more compensation than anyone else because they worked longer and harder.

If you were one of the workers hired on first, what would you have said? He cheated me. He’s favoring those guys! Unfair! There’s no way I am going to work for this guy again. Or maybe I will just wait, do the least amount possible, standing around doing nothing, and plan on him paying me the same as those who do all the hard work.

Now consider that the landowner represents God the Father and his workers are the people he calls on to believe in him. Do we cry out unfair on how God treats other believers? Do we look down on others who are not putting forward the same effort as I am? Do I hold back silent anger when I think about how much I give and give and give to the church, and yet how many people I think don’t even come close to that level, don’t even care about working hard for the church? Do I fall into the pattern of thinking I deserve more, that my thoughts and opinions are worth more than others who haven’t been here as long as I have?

This is the attitude of those first workers. One that begrudges how God deals with us, one that feels entitled to more than what was promised. You can even hear that in the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” We ask that because we think we as Christians are entitled to more, to better. I work for God. I want my wage, and that wage should be better than other people who are not as good of a Christian as I am. How dare you, God, make me equal to someone who is not my equal!

Yet, the first will be last and the last first. The landowner responds to the complaints, pointing out the first workers’ sense of entitlement. “I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius? Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my business? Are you jealous because I’m generous?” (verses 13-15) God defies common convention and gives the same pay to everyone because he wants to.

This is how God operates. His ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Can you begrudge him for the generosity he shows? This is how grace works. It is something that we do not deserve and we do not earn. It doesn’t matter the amount of service that you have put in as a Christian; God does not reward you based on hours served or effort exerted. He deals with you and me with undeserved love, with the over-the-top generosity of his grace.

This is the same grace that moved the king in our parable last week, again representing God the Father. The servant had that insurmountable pile of debt that he owed the king, but the king, out of grace, decided to wipe it all out. This is how God deals with us. He blesses us. He preserves us. He makes the sun shine on the righteous and the unrighteous. He gives the world seedtime and harvest. He provides his Son, Jesus Christ, as the one sacrifice, the one life, for the whole world. God deals with us in grace – love that we don’t deserve, which blesses us here on earth and forever as we live with him in heaven at the end of this life.

As we look around and see people who haven’t served God for as long as I have or who I think haven’t given to God as much as I have, I remember that he deals with me and my brothers and sisters in Christ by grace. I don’t deserve to be treated any better than anyone else. No matter if someone has served God for a long time or they have served only an hour, God gives me and them way more than we deserve. He wipes out my mountainous pile of sins with nothing owed. He gives me life. He gives me all the blessings I have not because I have earned or deserved them. Who am I to demand something that is not owed to me?

Just like the workers hired later, we work for God trusting that he will deal with us by grace, but now is not the time to stand idle. Listen to God call you to work being the father or mother he wants you to be; working as the obedient child, the diligent student, the faithful employee. Maybe you have gifts or skills, time or treasures that can be used within our church, for our church. Don’t stand around waiting to be hired. Go to the vineyard. Work for the landowner, for God the Father. Use your skills, your time, your treasure with the comfort of knowing that God will be generous with you as he operates by grace.

“Amazing Grace – how sweet the sound – that saved a wretch like me!” (CW 379:1) If you walk out of this church today with only one thing, let it be that God deals with you by his grace, completely undeserved and unmerited love, which in its highest expression gave you and me his Son as payment for our sins so that we can live forever with him in heaven. That’s amazing grace. That’s the grace by which God operates with us, and that’s the grace by which we work for God. Amen.