**Matthew 20:1-16 September 20, 2020**

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

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson, Matthew chapter 20 here re-reading these words. “But he replied to one of them, ‘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 workers 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?” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The master of the house is a shrewd business man. He needs workers and so he goes out to find them. He settles the payment with them, and makes sure that they understand that this is a salaried position and that they won’t be paid either by the hour or by the bushel. The workers go out and work, and after a while more workers join them, and then even more, and finally, just in the eleventh hour, or the hour right before the day would be done, even more workers come and work in the vineyard. These workers would look at this work as nothing more than a gift, as they probably assumed they wouldn’t be paid today and therefore wouldn’t eat. The master is shrewd, and also merciful. He lets them come and work anyway. The master of the house then pays everyone and you can imagine the scene. The workers who are cleaner and less sweaty get paid first, and in the back of the line are the guys who were out there all day. As everyone comes forward, they receive their payment, and so these guys who come last, who have been working all day see the cleaner and well rested workers receiving the same pay they were promised. Which means that they assumed they would receive further compensation, a higher salary, or even just a bonus for doing more than work than other workers that day. Upon coming to the master they put their hands out, expecting a tip or a thank you, or even just what they believe they deserved by working so hard all day which would be much more than just one denarius, and yet they receive, just one denarius. They are indignant, and the line of this parable that we shouldn’t overlook is that they grumbled at the master of the house, to his face saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” It’s significant because they were so upset that they grumbled right to the face of the one who employed them and got them off of the street that very same day, the one who had given them salvation from starvation just hours before. They felt like they were jipped, they were cheated, and this wasn’t right, and justice wasn’t done, but again we look back at the shrewd master of the house. The merciful, master of the house. They were promised a denarius, they received a denarius. Nothing wrong had happened.

So why did they believe they deserved more? The comparison. The work they did was up against the work of another. Certainly, the master would understand that they deserved more after they did more, right? Wrong. A denarius was promised, a denarius was given. That’s the nature of the work that was done, it was the masters to give and his decision was final. It was enough for them when they agreed to go out and work and it would have no doubt been enough for them if it wasn’t for the generosity and mercy of the master of the house. So why would his generosity scandalize them so much that they would grumble against their employer to his face? Why would they risk future employment and their livelihood to make a point that they deserved more? Because here Jesus is pointing out the nature of sin and how it turns everything we do back to ourselves, especially when we look at others. The workers who went out at the beginning of the day deserved more because they had done more. The workers who had gone out right at the end of the day deserved less because they did less. It makes logical sense! But the master of the house isn’t logical, not when it comes to his generosity. Not when it comes to his mercy. Not when it comes to his nature and how he relates to those who have been forgotten and not hired. He constantly searches for workers, he constantly is calling workers and sending them out into his vineyard, which means that his desire is not to see anyone starve but instead for all to be paid, fed, and taken care of.

So the problem isn’t the master of the house, it’s the workers, which shouldn’t come as any surprise as this parable portrays Christ as the master of the house, God as the master of the vineyard, and the Jews as the earlier workers and the Gentiles as later workers. As Matthew is primarily written to a Jewish audience it isn’t a stretch to say that here Jesus is illustrating that salvation is given not just to the Jews, God’s promised people of old who have been toiling and struggling as God’s people from the very beginning, but that salvation is also given to those who came later, and even later, and even now Gentiles who go to work in the eleventh hour. The reward remains the same, eternal life, the saving work of Christ upon the cross, the adoption of all those who call on the name of Jesus in faith and are given the crown of life. This is the denarius. You don’t **need** more than one, the payment is sufficient, it’s not like there is any additional blessing that comes from being paid more, heaven is the gift given by God to those who call on His name. Yet the workers who labored longer see it as less, because of what they did. They falsely think they deserve more, and this is the dangerous line that leads us all away from Christ.

Because it’s no different for us. In our lives if we do more we believe we should receive more, and if others do less than they should receive less. I remember the comparison of payments, gifts, and rewards very well because I am blessed to be the youngest of three boys. So when Mom and Dad hand out allowances, what do kids do? They compare them. I mowed the lawn, and you washed the dishes, but there really weren’t that many dishes so I’m sure you didn’t get paid the same….and you didn’t really do anything, so I can’t imagine you’d get the same amount… it all comes down to did we both get what we deserve? When report cards come home, what do kids do? They compare them. But it’s not just kids, financial reports come in, how much are they making compared to how much I make? And it goes on and on. We want to compare and make sure that everything is, fair. At least fair in our favor. When we get more than them, we hide it because we don’t want them to come after it. We hoard it and silence anyone who would give it away. Hide the evidence of the generosity of others because we don’t want anyone to come and steal it from us. Or, as this can sadly be the case especially when it comes to our sin, we glorify it. Where these workers who came at the eleventh hour don’t say anything to the other workers but receive the same payment as the others, and bless the Lord for His generosity, we would seek to rub it in their faces. We have in the past! Think of the times you have gloated over a great price, a deal that went your way, a rather large pay day or gift. Think about how easy it is for us to give in to comparing our work against someone else when we know that it is better or higher or greater. Not sparing our neighbor’s feelings or someone in our family but instead wanting to glorify ourselves.

That’s our natural state, not one of humility, not one of thanksgiving to God’s generosity, and mercy, but one of glorification of ourselves. And we must repent of this. We must come to the master of the house and in humility pray for forgiveness for the times when we have sought only to glorify ourselves. Because this parable isn’t about the work that is done by the workers, it isn’t a teaching moment that we all should work for the Lord and receive our reward. The fact that the workers were in the vineyard, and even going to be paid was only done by the grace of the master of the house. No it’s about the attitude of the workers who had been blessed to work all day, and how they didn’t look at the generosity of the master of the house, and how he had paid them, but instead looked at the other workers and didn’t consider them equal with them based on what they had done.

The reality is we are all equal when it comes to sin. We are all dead to sin, we are all failures to sin, there is nothing to compare, there is no one who gets to say that they have a better track record and therefore deserve to be saved more than anyone else. The passing grade is a perfect 100% and none of our grades have made it past, 0. So the comparison is meaningless, all have sinned, all have fallen short, all were born into sin, and all are dead to sin and transgressions. How dare we compare ourselves to others and believe we deserve anything from God based on what we have done, when we spend all day choosing to do the wrong things and neglecting to do the right things. But we justify it by pointing out that those around us in our lives and those we know in the world are doing the exact same things. We deserve nothing from God, and yet he is generous. Thanks be to God for his gift to us. Others who come to the faith later in life, or who return to the faith, in the same way, don’t deserve this reconciliation based on anything that they have done, they don’t deserve salvation and the love of the Savior any more than we do, yet he is generous. Thanks be to God for his gift to them.

Thanks be to God for the denarius, the gift of salvation, the light at the end of the tunnel in our lives of service which include bearing the burden of the day and withstanding the scorching heat, which can be a description of the turning up of the heat in our culture and society when it comes to the hatred of bearing Christ’s name to those around us in our contemporary times. We are called to serve in the places God has called us. We are called by God to go out into the vineyards of this world and bear His name in all vocations, from ditch digger to baker to farmer to teacher to student and not just occupations but from father to mother to daughter to son and any other calling. Paul speaks about his relationship to the world and the work that he was called to do in spreading the Gospel, while he himself is in jail wondering if he’s going to be killed, he praises the Lord because of the witness he could make to the imperial guard. He thanks the Lord that others were emboldened to speak the truth after his arrest. Right in the middle of our Epistle lesson in one sentence he sums it up by saying “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” What an amazing summary of the Gospel. To live is to live in service to Christ, to live is to be in the vineyard as a worker of the Lord, the one who has saved us and the entire world, the one who has laid down his life to take away your sin. To live is to be a beacon of his light to others but when that service is done, is that any cause for sadness? No. To die is gain.

To die is to gain the denarius, and trust me, the denarius is more than enough. To die is to leave the vineyard and the work is done. It’s gain, it’s glory, it’s not something to fear or run from, it’s to gain. Until that day, we see the responsibility we have to continue to work for God, don’t mistake this verse to be that we never preserve life or that we even falsely would believe that we would be justified in taking our own life to receive the crown of heaven. That’s not what this is saying at all! Instead see that whether we live or we die, we are the Lord’s. And as Paul states, “For it has been granted to you, that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”

Suffer for Christ, it doesn’t sound very fun does it? Working in the vineyard all day doesn’t sound either, and even one hour of work wouldn’t be considered easy, there would be a certain amount of suffering even in that. Suffering for Christ means that we share in the smallest bit what he went through for us, not to receive a reward, not to be seen as a higher level of Christian, but simply to thank God for the gift of His Son, and the salvation won for the world. Are we better because we’ve been here longer? No. Never. Not even one percent. Can God do what God wants in the giving of the denarius of salvation? You bet. And we shouldn’t feel any jealousy over that gift. Thanks be to God for his generosity shown to us, and to others. May we all appreciate this gift and live lives of service to the master of the house in the vineyard, until the day is done and we receive the denarius of salvation.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.