

## **In Nomine Iesu**

### **Septuagesima Sunday 2022**

#### **How does God rule His kingdom? – Matthew 20:1-16**

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Again, he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard and whatever is right you will receive.’ So when evening had come the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’ So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.” Jesus did not tell His disciples the parable to help them be either successful businessmen or rightly paid laborers. The parable is not about worldly things, but about the kingdom of heaven. It is about how God, our King, rules His kingdom. God is personified by the vineyard owner, man by the workers in the vineyard. To be sure, Jesus is teaching us something about ourselves. But above all, He is teaching us about God.

So, what do we learn about God? Well, if He were a businessman, He wouldn’t be a successful one. He would be the kind who allows his workers to take advantage of Him, as He Himself indicates at the end, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?” A businessman like Him would quickly run any for-profit business into the ground. No, God, our King, would be a poor businessman. And the reason is simple: He did not involve Himself in our affairs in order to profit Himself, but to profit us. Let us look more closely at this parable and ask: How does God rule His kingdom?

## **I**

Everyone here knows what it feels like to look forward to your next paycheck after working long hours. You also know that, if you’ve worked at a job for any length of time, you know almost exactly what you are going to be paid before you hold

the pay receipt in hand and read the amount. You know how you would feel if you received less than you expected. So, you know very well what was in the minds of the workers who complained to the vineyard owner. They wanted what they were sure was rightly theirs. People have a right to demand fairness from an employer. You and I would do the same thing if our paycheck weren't right.

So, we know from our own experience that the workers in the vineyard really did have a valid point, if, that is, the vineyard owner were in business to make a profit for himself. What is equally clear from the text is that the landowner did not want to give **any** of his workers what they had coming to them! Patiently, he reasoned with them, saying, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" (vv. 13-15) What he is suggesting is true. In these things our eye is evil. We do not see things as they really are. That is why Jesus often taught people extraordinary things in parables that concerned ordinary things. The problem of the human condition is that we think we see everything clearly, clearly enough to stand in judgment of God. We're inclined to think about God as if He were one of us, bigger than life to be sure, but finally as just a man, conceived of on a grand scale. That is the fallen human condition.

We judge everything by the experience of our own lives, our good times and bad times, our accomplishments and our sufferings. We cannot help but do so, that is exactly the nature of the human condition. We judge that God owes us for the time we've put in. And in truth He does, but what we are owed isn't what we think.

In another place God's word says, "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is **none who understands**; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one." (Romans 3:10-12) As if that were not enough, St. Pauls says: "Do you think this, O man, ... that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who '**will render to each one according to his deeds**'." (Romans 2:3-6) Do we see what it is that we really are owed by God?

## II

The grace of God is such that He does not desire to give us what we truly deserve for the time we've put in. No, He desires to give us what is His. As the landowner said to His laborers, "I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with **my own things**?" What things? St. Paul put it this way, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) The landowner desires to give us good things.

When we look at how those hired at the eleventh hour were rewarded, we readily grasp how it seemed unjust to anyone who worked through the whole of the long hot day. But what does the owner of the vineyard say? "Friend, I am doing you no wrong." So it is with the things of God. The reward of faith comes to those whose

trust is in work done not by themselves, but by Another, by Another who in the early morning was condemned for our sins, at the third hour was crucified, from the sixth was suffering the torments of hell as darkness covered the land, and at the ninth hour cried out, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani – My God, My God, What have You forsaken Me?”; and at the eleventh, said, “It is finished,” and died for the sins of the world. Faith trusts the One who by the eleventh hour was being taken down from the cross to be laid in the grave at the end of the day.

Those who worked all day were offended that others should receive reward for little or no work. But to be offended at the faithful of God, who despair of their own works and trust instead in the works of Christ for their salvation, is to be angry not at them, but at the vineyard owner himself, at God. It is to accuse Him of wrong-doing. What did the vineyard owner say to those who complained against him, who alone is truly good? “Take what is yours and go your way.” Take what you have earned for yourselves. Go your way. Go like faithless Judas, who went to his own place. Dearly beloved of God for Jesus’ sake, none of us deserve anything good from God for the time we have put in in this life. No, we deserve His wrath, as He clearly says in His word. And His wrath is what we will receive if we refuse what is His and insist on receiving the reward of our own work.

Make no mistake, those who trust not in their own works but in His who suffered through the burden and heat of that day will be vindicated. So, dear friends, what have we learned about how our King rules His kingdom? He rules it by the word of forgiveness that He gives to us for the sake of Jesus Christ, His Son. He rules our hearts and minds by His forgiving word and life-giving sacraments, through which He applies to us a merit and worthiness we have not earned. There, in word and sacrament, God credits to our account not the time we have put in, but the time put in by His Son in life as He earned true righteousness through His own perfect thoughts, words, and deeds, and who alone bore the burden and heat of the Friday we call Good, to which we begin the countdown today.

+++

So, you see, the picture before us this morning is one of injustice only if we look at it as those who do not believe in Christ. By faith we know that nothing we have done, no matter how burdensome, no matter how much of the heat of the day we have suffered, is untouched by sin. It is only what Christ has done in our place and for our sake that satisfies the Father, that stills His wrath toward sin. Those things that belong to Christ the Father, the vineyard owner, gives to all who believe in Him who suffered the burden and heat of that day of suffering, crucifixion, and death so long ago. He gives to all who, because of Christ, have escaped the burden and heat of that day, the denarius of His mercy. He gives to us not what we have earned, but what Christ has earned for us. That, dear friends, is how our good and gracious God and King, rules His kingdom. That is the central truth of the holy, Christian faith we confess this day as we turn our hearts from Christmas toward Good Friday and Easter. Amen.

**Soli Deo Gloria**