



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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It's not Faith; It's Grace

St. Matthew 20:1-16

Fr. William Klock

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In the Gospel last Sunday we heard about John the Baptist, out in the wilderness of the Jordan Valley calling the people of Israel to “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!” We heard how he baptised the people who came to him in repentance. The things he was doing pointed to the Lord hearing the cries of his people, of the Lord delivering them from their enemies, of the Lord visiting them and making his presence with them—of the Lord leading them in a new Exodus, much as he had their ancestors so many centuries before. “Are you the Messiah?” they asked John. But John warned them, “No. I’m just the one sent to announce the Messiah’s coming. I’m not worthy to untie his shoe. All I can do is plunge you in the water, but he will plunge you in the Holy Spirit!” What John was announcing was an exodus of which the first was only a shadow. Yes, God would visit his people; yes, God would deliver them; and yes, God would come to dwell in their midst, but not in any way he had ever dwelled in their midst before. In the person of the Holy Spirit, he would enter their very lives, making the people themselves the temple of the Lord. In light of that John’s recruiting pitch for the kingdom might make a lot more sense. Not only was the Messiah coming, but so was the Spirit—the *Holy Spirit*—and so Israel needed to repent, turning

aside from all unholiness, and prepare for the Lord.

Now this Sunday, Septuagesima—seventy days from Easter—the Church calls again to prepare. The season of Lent prepares us for Easter and these three “gesima” Sundays call us to be ready, to prepare, for the season of preparation. John calls us to repent, for the kingdom has come. And we repent. We turn aside from everything else and, in faith, we follow Jesus into a new kind of life—just like the disciples did. But what does that life look like? What does Jesus expect of us? It’s one thing to talk about repentance and about following Jesus, but when we do that, what exactly is it that we’re doing and what does it look like to be in his service? Today’s Gospel Jesus tells a story and gives us a sense of what it means to be harvesters in the Lord’s vineyard. Jesus begins in Matthew 20:1:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”

Jesus often begins his parables with those words: “The kingdom of heaven (or the kingdom of God) is like...” And if we’ve been listening to Jesus for very long at all, we know right away that Jesus is now going to tell us about some way in which his kingdom is very different—usually entirely the *opposite*—of the ways and values of the present age.

And before we go further it’s important we know or that we remember that when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he’s not talking about some other-worldly reality “up there”. He’s

not talking about the “afterlife”. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience and since Jews avoided directly naming God, instead of writing about the “kingdom of God” as the other evangelists did, Matthew substituted “kingdom of heaven”. The point is that this kingdom that Jesus is telling his disciples about isn’t something a long way off; it’s something he’s brought with him—it’s something he’s inaugurating. We’re still waiting for the kingdom’s consummation when it comes in all its fullness, but that doesn’t mean that it isn’t very much a present reality here and now. John—and Jesus too!—called the people to repent, for the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Repentance is the way into it and when we repent, when we pass through the waters of baptism in faith, taking hold of Jesus and his promise of forgiveness and life, it’s *this* kingdom into which we enter.

So we’ve entered Jesus’ kingdom, like the disciples having been baptized by John and now following Jesus. He says that he’s given us new life. But what does that life look like? What are the values of this kingdom? How shall we then live? The disciples were still learning when Jesus told them this parable. In Chapter 19 we read about the rich young ruler who came to Jesus, asking, “What must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus told him that he had to give up everything—he told him to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. For him that’s what repentance meant. Jesus knew what this man’s real god was his wealth. And Matthew tells us that the rich man went away grieving because he was very wealthy. Jesus turned to his disciples and told them, “It’s easier for a camel

to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom.” And it’s at that point that Peter chimes in, “Lord, we’ve given up everything to follow you! I guess that means we can look forward to a big reward someday.”

Jesus does tell them that, yes, someday they will sit on twelve thrones beside him, judging Israel. He also tells them that everyone who leaves everything for his sake will receive a hundred-fold along with eternal life. *But* he also warns them, “Many who are now first will then be last, and those who are last will then be first!” Jesus is saying: Don’t misunderstand the kingdom. You don’t follow me for riches or power. Riches and power of what the present age values; the kingdom of God is about something much greater. The kingdom of God is about restoring the old order that was lost when Adam sinned. Think about it. Adam was the richest person who ever lived. And he was given dominion over the Lord’s creation. But his riches were a very different kind of riches and his power was a very different kind of power than the riches and power valued by the present age.

With that Jesus launches into this parable:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.”

(Matthew 20:1-2)

Jesus gives us the picture of a wealthy vineyard owner. The grapes are ripe and they’ve got to

be harvested *now*. Wait too long and they’ll start to rot, that is, if the birds don’t get to them first. So he goes to the town marketplace where the day-labourers gather each morning hoping for work. These weren’t men with regular jobs. They took what they could get each day. When I read this story I think of driving through a Southern California Home Depot parking lot early in the morning. Sitting outside were a bunch of men—most of them probably illegal immigrants—and contractors would drive up in trucks and vans. They’d hold up so many fingers and that many men would pile into the van or the back of the truck and off they’d go to work for the day. That’s the sort of scene Jesus is describing here.

The work day typically ran from about six in the morning until six in the evening. The man offers them a denarius for the day’s work. That would have been a typical day’s wage for a day-labourer. And they all agree: a denarius for twelve hours of work, and off they go down the road to his vineyard.

And yet as the day wears on the man realises he needs more workers. Maybe the first men hired weren’t working fast enough or maybe the man underestimated the size of the harvest. Maybe the weather looks to be taking a turn for the worse and he realises that they need to get the harvest in faster than expected. Whatever the case, he goes back to the marketplace for more men.

And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is

right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. (Matthew 20:3-5)

At about nine o’clock he went out and hired more workers and then again at noon and even again at three, with only about three hours left in the day. He told them he’d pay them what was right and to them that meant a denarius pro-rated for the fewer hours they worked. But yet, even at five o’clock, with only an hour left to the day, the man went back looking for more workers. It doesn’t sound like he expected to find any workers left, and yet there are still a few hanging around. No one hired them and they had nothing better to do than keep each other company all day. Look at verses 6 and 7:

And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’

Why were they still there? Because no one had hired them, they say. No one wanted them. When the man in the pickup drove by and waved four fingers and they started walking to the truck he said, “No, not you. Those other four.” Maybe they had bad reputations. Whatever the case, no one would hire them and so they sat there all day with nothing to do. When evening came they would go home to their families empty handed because they hadn’t earned any money to buy the day’s food. But the vineyard owner needs more workers, even if it’s only for an

hour. The harvest has to be brought in and it has to be brought in now. So off they go down the road to the vineyard to work.

Up to this point the kingdom of heaven doesn't look any different from the present age other than, maybe, that the man was willing to hire the men nobody else wanted to hire. The difference comes at the end of the day. Jesus goes on in verse 8:

And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. (Matthew 20:8-10)

The man makes a point of showing off his generosity by having his foreman pay the workers who came last first. Again, day labourers worked for a denarius. The men who only worked part of the day wouldn't have expected a full day's pay—especially not the men who only worked an hour. But the foreman hands each of them a full denarius. And as the other men watch they think, there must be some mistake. "He said he'd pay us a denarius for the whole day. Now he's paying these guys a denarius for an hour of work. Wait! Maybe we heard wrong this morning. Maybe he was offering a denarius an hour. Who does that? Anyway, he really must have been desperate for his grapes to be picked." And so they start looking forward to a twelve-denarius pay

packet. But then the foreman gets to the men who worked three hours and he pays them a single denarius each. Hmm. And then a denarius each to the men who worked half the day...and a denarius each to men who started mid-morning. These were poor men. Imagine the excitement of the men who thought they'd have nothing to take home to their families. They only worked an hour and yet they've got a whole day's pay to take home. And imagine the excitement of the men who worked all day as they watched the late-comers receive their denarius. Again, these were poor men. If they were going to be paid more than a denarius it was a big deal to them. And yet the foreman gets to them and gives each of them a denarius too. And despite having been paid precisely what they had agreed on with the vineyard owner, having been paid the usual, going wage, they're upset.

And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 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.' (Matthew 20:11-12)

I don't think there's a person who has heard this story and not been at least a little sympathetic with these workers. How is it fair that men who worked only an hour are paid the same as the men who laboured away all day, especially through the mid-day heat? I think of my own experience working for different companies and employers. I worked in places where everyone was paid the same amount and some of us who

worked hard would grumble that our co-workers who were lazy or less competent were paid the same. On the other hand, the last place I worked made it a terminable offense for employees to even discuss wages or to tell anyone what they made. When I was hired I asked what the pay range was for the job and they refused to tell me. Instead, they asked me what my expectations were. They negotiated the lowest possible salary with each new employee and the result was an enormous range in salaries for people doing the same job—and they didn't want anyone to know what anyone else made lest there be a revolt. We figured things out anyway and our "fairness radar" kicked in. On the one hand, when everyone was paid the same, it wasn't fair for lazy workers to earn the same as productive workers, but then when we were all paid differently it wasn't fair that some made more than others for doing the same job. This is how we're conditioned to think. We resent someone else being given something that we don't think they deserve. We couch it in language about "fairness", but at the end of the day it's just plain old jealousy.

And here Jesus reminds us that the values of his kingdom are very different. He goes on in verse 13:

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 worker 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?' So the

last will be first, and the first last.” (Matthew 20:13-16)

Again, this parable follows right after the encounter with the rich young ruler. Jesus promised that if anyone will give up everything they will be repaid a hundred-fold. He promised the disciples that they would sit on thrones with him to judge Israel. But lest they get it in their heads that the kingdom is about riches and power he tells them a story that illustrates the nature of *grace*—and it’s grace that the kingdom is all about.

The men who worked all day didn’t think it was fair that those who worked only half the day or only an hour should be paid for the whole day. It wasn’t “fair”. They begrudge the man’s generosity. But think about it. They got what they’d been promised and there was nothing stingy about a denarius for a day’s work—that was the going rate. They went home with money to put food on the table for their families. And so did the men who worked only an hour. Why can’t they be happy for those men who, if it wasn’t for the generosity of the vineyard owner, would have gone home with no food for their families?

Jesus’ warning seems to be directed at the disciples. Already they seemed to be getting the idea that when the kingdom came, they’d have some kind of special status that they could lord over others. They had followed Jesus first and that meant that Jesus owed them a greater share in the kingdom than he owed the late-comers. But that’s not how grace works. Grace, by definition, is unmerited favour. You can’t earn

it. It’s not a right. Nobody owes it to you. That’s the whole point. None of us comes to Jesus bargaining for grace: “Okay, Jesus, I’ll give up *this* much and you give me *that* much. And it’s not something we can store up as if you can have more than I can or I can have more than you.

We see grace in this scene Jesus paints for us. While the workers he called first are busy labouring and sweating under the hot sun, Jesus returns over and over to the marketplace to find more workers who need to provide for their families. Jesus even goes back and hires the ones no one would take—the lazy ones, the dimwits, the clumsy ones, the ones who never seemed to be able to do the job right. Jesus rounds them up, even if it’s late in the day, puts them to work and out of his abounding generosity, he gives them a full day’s pay.

You see, the grace isn’t about wages. God doesn’t negotiate employment contracts with his people. God calls us into covenant with himself. And in that covenant he promises his *everything* to us, and in return the covenant demands we give our *everything* back to him. If that sounds like a hard bargain we need to remember that when we say that God gave his everything for us what we mean is that in Jesus God—the almighty Creator of the cosmos—humbled himself to take on our form and humbly died the death we deserve—*for us*. That’s grace. That’s unmerited favour.

And, Brothers and Sisters, the only response is gratitude—gratitude for having been given a full measure of grace ourselves and gratitude for

the overflowing and abundant generosity of God that he not only shows us grace, but that he shows the same abounding grace to others. Rather than resenting those who came at the last hour and were given grace, rather than resenting that God would call the lazy and the dimwits and the ne’er-do-wells and reward them just as he has us, all of this should move us to praise and to celebrate a God who is so good. And consider after all, no matter how long you yourself have laboured under the hot sun for the Lord, there will always be someone who has laboured longer and there will always be someone who has laboured better and who is overjoyed that our Lord has chosen to be generous in pouring his grace on you—knowing that not one of us has been given what we truly deserve, but through Jesus have been shown grace—unmerited favour—in overflowing abundance. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, let us never forget that the wages of our sin is death, but that in Jesus you have poured out your grace on us and given us life that we do not and can never deserve. Fill our hearts with gratitude as you will us with your grace. Make us grateful for the grace in our lives and make us grateful for the grace you pour into others and let us respond to your grace by giving our everything just as you have given your everything for us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.