



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for Septuagesima 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 & St. Matthew 20:1-16

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February 16, 2025

Over and over Jesus would say to the people, “The kingdom of heaven is like...this. And then he’d go on to tell them a story. In today’s Gospel he says, “It’s like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourer for his vineyard.” Jesus draws this imagery straight from the Prophets, so he doesn’t have to explain very much. In the Prophets the vineyard owner is always the Lord. The vineyard or the people working in it were always Israel. So as Jesus tells his story, Matthew and John and Peter and the rest can easily imagine themselves getting up that morning, leaving their wives and children, and going to the town square in the hopes someone will have work for them. Day labourers were pretty much at the bottom of society. In some ways slaves were better off. At least a slave’s owner was obligated to clothe and feed him and his family. A day labourer lived a meagre hand to mouth existence. If there was no work, he didn’t eat. If there was work, he did it, earned just enough to buy food for his family, and got up the next morning already tired, but ready to do it all over again. If there wasn’t work, he either begged or he and his family went hungry. So Jesus’ hearers imagine themselves arriving at the town square just before sunrise with their tools in hand and are glad to see this man who offers them a denarius and sends them down the road to harvest his grapes. A denarius was the going rate for a day’s common labour. Again, it wasn’t much, but their families would eat tonight and then tomorrow it’d start all over again.

The labourers had been labouring hard for a good three hours by mid-morning. The wind changed. Rain was coming. Maybe tonight; definitely tomorrow. The harvest had to come in before the rain, so the vineyard owner went back to town. There were still plenty of men waiting to be hired for the day, so he tapped as many as he thought he needed, promised, “I’ll pay you what’s right,” and sent them to harvest his grapes.

By noon the clouds started rolling in over the mountains. Rain was coming sooner than expected so off he went to town again. The sun was hot now. Everyone could imagine themselves labouring away in the vineyard. Maybe the day Jesus told them the story was a hot one and they could feel the heat pressing in on them. Thank goodness they were sitting in the shade of a tree, not carrying heavy baskets of grapes out under the hot sun, kicking up dust as they shuffled under heavy loads. But they could imagine. They were *in* the story on that sweltering day. They were certainly earning their denarius! Even those men who started at noon would be exhausted when the day was done. And in the backs of their minds they were thinking, “Okay...the men working so hard, they’re Israel, they’re us. Where is this going?”

By mid-afternoon the dark rainclouds were almost on them, but there was still too much work to be done. The man hurried back to town. Still there were men waiting for work. They were probably expecting to go home empty-handed, going to bed hungry. Their children would cry. But if they left the town square they’d miss out on even that small chance that someone might come late in the day with a job. “Get to my vineyard and pick like the wind,” the man said, “and I’ll pay you what’s right.” So off they ran, not wasting a moment. And the work wasn’t so bad now that the sky was dark and the wind was blowing.

But still, an hour til quitting time, there was work to do and then the first

raindrops began to fall. The man ran back to town and rounded up the last few men left...the ones just about ready to go home empty-handed or maybe ready to beg some bread from someone. An hour’s pay was better than no pay at all, so off they went to help the others finish.

And finish they did. And here’s where Jesus gets to the heart of that bit about “The kingdom of God is like...” As the thunder began and the rain started pouring, the foreman gathered the men in the barn and pulling the foreman aside, the man said to him, “Pay them their wages, but start with those men who came last and end with the guys who have been here all day.” Imagine being one of those men who worked only an hour, who, even if they could buy a little food, would still go to bed hungry. Imagine their reaction as the foreman put a whole denarius in each of their hands. Again, it wasn’t much, but it was a whole day’s wage. And imagine the men who had been working since sun-up and mid-morning. Maybe they’d heard wrong. They looked at each other. Some of them said, “No. A denarius for the day. That was the deal. That’s *always* the deal.” But if he was paying these guys who’d only worked an hour a whole denarius, maybe they’d get twelve! Or at least more than one. But their excitement faded as the foremen went down the line and gave a denarius to everyone: to the men who had worked since mid-afternoon, to the men who’d worked since noon, to the men who’d worked since mid-morning, and even to the men who had been there all day.

They grumbled. I can just hear impetuous Peter interrupting Jesus: “What a jerk! That’s not fair! Jesus, I think you meant to say, ‘The kingdom is *not* like...’” So first the men grumbled to each other and finally one of them got worked up enough to grumble directly to the vineyard owner. “What gives, Boss? Those guys over there only worked an hour and you’ve paid them exactly the same thing that you paid us. We’ve worn

ourselves out working all day...and, man, it was a scorcher. You've done us wrong!"

The men were angry, but the vineyard owner responded gently. "Friend, I've done you no wrong. I offered to pay you a denarius for a day's work and you agreed. That's the going rate after all. I've given you exactly what we agreed on. Take your pay and go home to your family. Be happy that you can feed them tonight. And be happy for these other men. They can go home and feed their families tonight too. You know what it's like to go home empty-handed. How can you be angry that their children will eat tonight? Don't be angry at my generosity." And then, no longer telling a parable, Jesus says to his disciples, "So the last will be first, and the first last."

And with that Matthew and John and Peter and all the rest of the twelve and all the people gathered scratched their heads and looked at Jesus, more than a little confused. "The last will be first and the first will be last?" Just four verses later we read that James and John got their mother to put in a good word for them with Jesus. "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand one at your left, in your kingdom." I have to wonder if this was in response to the whole thing about the last being first and the first being last. James and John (and their mother) were worried about their place in the kingdom. And, of course, when the others heard about this they were angry with James and John, because...of course...they all wanted to sit in those places of honour. But that was most decidedly *not* what the kingdom of God is like. Hardly anyone understood and that's because almost everyone had forgotten about grace. James and John were afraid that one of the other disciples might do something extra special and earn greater favour from Jesus. Imagine the jealousy they had when Peter confessed to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God"

and Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah...on this rock I will build my church." Uh oh. Just when John, who could smugly tell people that he was Jesus' *best* friend, just when he thought that Jesus was going to make *him* Pope! They're all vying for a special place in the kingdom. They're all worried that Jesus is going to give something special to one of the other disciples and not to them.

No one...or almost no one...understood, because almost everyone had forgotten about grace. The Jewish people, of all people, should have understood the grace of God. They lived it every day and they had for more than a thousand years. God's grace was exemplified by the manna in the wilderness. It was new every morning. There was always just enough for the day. God even miraculously provided a little extra for those days—the sabbaths—when you couldn't go out and gather it. But otherwise, if you tried to store it up, if you tried to take more than you needed, if you tried to outdo your neighbours, do you remember what happened to the manna? It rotted and stank and grew worms. Brothers and Sisters, God's grace is always just enough to meet our needs and to see us through today. I think that's why Jesus chose to tell his parable about those poor day-labourers. A denarius was just enough for the day. After you fed your family there was nothing left to save. You went back to the town square in the morning and hoped someone would hire you for another day and another denarius. The only difference being that God's grace is not a wage that we earn. It's not a reward for good service. It's not a sign of special status. It's simply life in his presence, sustained by his goodness. And it comes not by negotiating with him. It comes as we enter into his covenant. You don't get more because Jesus called you early nor do you get less because he called you late. You get enough, just because he called you. He promises his all for us and in return we promise

our all to him. In his gracious love he has given his Son for us and made us his covenant people. In loving gratitude we give our all to him and to his kingdom. We believed in the first place because we saw his goodness and his faithfulness manifest in Jesus and in his death and resurrection, and we continue to believe because, every day we put out our hands and he pours his grace into them, always just what we need for today. Always what we need to accomplish the work he has set before us.

I think that, too, is a key to the parable. The men were summoned to work in the vineyard. So was Israel and so are we. Think way back to the beginning. The Lord called Abraham for a reason. He and his children were to be light in the darkness, they were to make the Lord known to a world that had forgotten him. Israel was to be the people who lived with the living God in her midst so that the nations would see and know him. When she failed in that mission, the Lord gave his Son to die on the cross and to rise from the grave in order to set his people to rights and to establish a new covenant and a new people. And so *we* carry on the mission. We proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord and we live the life of the Spirit before the eyes of the watching world and they see the faithfulness of God on full display—a faithfulness that none of the gods or kings of this age can compare with—and they come, and they believe, and the Lord pours his grace into their hands just as he has ours and the mission goes on until the earth is filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you." That wasn't a promise of wealth or of power or of a position of privilege at his right hand over and above everyone else. Brothers and Sisters, it was a promise of his grace—like the manna in the wilderness. Always enough for today, for life and for work and for ministry and for whatever

struggles we face and always enough to share with the people around us. Always enough to do the kingdom work he has given us to do today.

And that's where our Epistle today dovetails into the Gospel. The Gospel speaks of grace, but because we are so prone to forgetting that grace requires discipline, the lectionary today give us this passage from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. Let's look at those four verses again. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

Don't you know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? So run in such a way that you'll win it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to gain a crown that perishes; we do it for an imperishable one. So then, I don't run aimlessly; I don't box like someone punching the air. No, I discipline my body and make it my slave, lest after preaching to others, I myself should end up being disqualified.

If you haven't read 1 Corinthians in a while, it's helpful to recall the context. Paul knew the people there were believers. They'd stretched out their hands and God had poured his grace into them. But they weren't putting that grace to work for the sake of the kingdom. They were using their Spirit-given gifts to build themselves up rather than each other and they were abusing God's grace to justify sins that, Paul writes, even made the pagans blush. They were not seeking first the kingdom.

Brothers and Sisters, the Christian life isn't aimless. In calling us to himself, the Lord has given us a mission and a future hope. St. Paul likens the Christian life to running a race and boxing in a match. Serious athletes train. Serious athletes *discipline* themselves. They get up early, they eat healthy, and they work hard. Paul first uses the illustration of a runner in a footrace. If he's willing to discipline himself and put in that effort for a

laurel crown, how much more ought we to discipline ourselves to run this race that ends with the resurrection of the dead and new creation and life in the presence of God? But how often do we dink around instead? How much do we invest in things that don't ultimately matter instead of pursuing Jesus and his kingdom with everything we've got? Paul compares this to a poorly trained boxer throwing punches at the air instead of his opponent. Aimlessly throwing punches won't win the prize. Instead, it'll probably end with your opponent landing a knockout punch on you. So Paul stresses the need to discipline ourselves—especially reigning in our sinful appetites. He even talks about being disqualified in the end because of failure. What's that about? If we're saved by grace, how can we fail?

Think of the grand biblical narrative of God and his people. Too often we reduce things like God's salvation and his grace to abstract theological terms, but it's important we remember their place in the big story of God and his people. Think again of Israel, delivered from Egypt by the Lord. I mentioned this before, but let's expand on it.

The people of Israel were slaves to Pharaoh. They cried out to the Lord and he rescued them. And yet he didn't just strike down Pharaoh and his army and set the Israelites free to go do whatever they wanted. "Love you guys. I'll see you in heaven someday. Now go have fun." No, Israel was *his* people. He'd called and claimed this people for himself in Abraham. In delivering Israel from Pharaoh the Lord was claiming back what was rightly his. And so he declared to Israel: You are my firstborn son. I will be your God and you will be my people. He led Israel through the Red Sea and through the wilderness, met them at Mt. Sinai, and there he entered into a covenant with them. He gave them the law. For his part, he would be their God with all

that entailed. Their part of the covenant—their *obligation*—was to fulfil the calling he gave them, to be the people who lived with him in their midst and, in doing that, to be a light in the midst of the nations. The Lord had work to do. He's going to set his fallen creation to rights and his plan all along has been to do that work through his people. Adam was created to be the high priest and steward of his temple, his Creation. And when the Lord called Abraham in his grace, when he saved Abraham's children from Egypt in his grace, it was to create a holy nation, a nation of priests, a people of grace to once again be his stewards on earth—as Adam once had been. So the law was the means by which they maintained the holiness necessary to live in the Lord's presence and to be his witnesses. So notice that the Lord's calling of Israel and his deliverance of her from Egypt were all of grace, and yet to live as his people meant devotion and discipline. Because they had a job to do. God made them stewards of his grace.

And as we read through the Old Testament, Israel repeatedly failed in her disciplined devotion to the Lord and to the covenant he had established with them. As the Prophets said, it was a heart problem. And to fix that heart problem, Jesus brought forgiveness to his people—to those who put their faith in him and became part of the renewed people of God, and he gave them God's own Spirit to fix that heart problem, to turn their hearts towards the Lord. Brothers and Sisters, you and I are part of that new covenant community, the people who belong to God through Jesus, the people whom he has redeemed from sin's bondage that we might be bound to him and to the service of his kingdom. Jesus does not set us free so that we can go do whatever we want, so that we can serve the Lord half-heartedly, so that we can live with divided loyalties any more than the Lord delivered Israel from Egypt so that they could worship other gods or serve foreign kings. Through Jesus,

we have been redeemed so that we can be faithful stewards of the Lord in this world, to do what we were created to do in the first place, to be the people who live with the Lord himself in our midst and in that, to be light in the darkness, to be witnesses of God's grace and goodness and love and to declare the royal summons: Jesus is Lord. To lift the veil on God's future, on his new creation so that the people around us can have a taste of what's to come.

And it's *hard* work. Hard enough that Jesus has given us his own Spirit, knowing that only by his Spirit can we ever labour through the heat of the day and accomplish our task. The world, the flesh, and the devil compete for our loyalties. The gods and kings of the present age fight back and oppose us. Too often we try to live with one foot in the age to come and one still in the present age. Our loyalties are still often divided between Jesus and the gods of the present age. And even in the Church, we often put too much of our energy into things that don't ultimately matter. Some of us might as well be sitting on the sidelines of the race. Others of us are like the boxer wildly throwing punches, working up a sweat, but none of them ever landing where they'll do any good. Brothers and Sisters, we owe the Lord our all in return for the grace he has poured out on us.

The season of Lent is a time for us to focus on the grace that the Lord has poured out on us in Jesus. But these three Sunday with the funny Latin names: Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima...that means seventieth, sixtieth, and fiftieth as we count down to Easter...these three Sundays of preparation remind us that grace in action must be coupled with discipline, with humility, and with love. If we are to be faithful stewards of the Lord's grace, we first need to dedicate ourselves to the Lord's grace. We have to know it ourselves, before we can share it with others. Brothers and Sisters, commit yourself to the

Lord. Give him your full allegiance as King. Get up each morning and renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil, then go out to collect the manna for today. Steep yourselves in the means of grace that he has given. Be disciplined in immersing yourself in his word and in prayer and do not neglect to meet together, but exhort one another to love and to good works. And receive the Lord's invitation to his Supper. Here at his Table he reminds us of the sacrifice he made at the cross, giving his all...even his life...for our sake, to forgive our sins and to defeat even death itself, to make his enemies his friends. Don't decline his invitation. Put out your hands and take the bread, open your mouth and drink the wine, God's grace poured out for you in Jesus. Be strengthened to work in the Lord's vineyard and remember that no matter how hard the work, his grace is always enough.

Let us pray: Father, in today's Collect we acknowledge that we who ought to be justly punished for offences have been mercifully delivered by your goodness *and for the glory of your name*. We pray that we never forget the reason that you have delivered us and that our priority in all things will be the glory of your name as we share your grace with others and proclaim the good news about your kingdom and about the Lord Jesus. Teach us to be faithful steward of your grace, O Lord. Amen.