

Prayers

In peace let us pray to the Lord.

Collect of the Day

Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Scripture Readings

Psalm 27:1-9 (antiphon v. 4a)

Isaiah 55:6-9

Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30

Matthew 20:1-16

Hymns

Hymn of the Day – 555

Other Hymns – 565 (OT), 745 (E), 757 (E), 827 (G), 854 (G)

For all who serve in Your kingdom, heavenly Father, that we would ever be mindful that it is only by grace that we are members of Your kingdom and privileged to serve in it. Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

For the nurturing of children, that all parents would see children as blessings from You, dear heavenly Father, and so bring them to the waters of Holy Baptism, love and care for them, and nourish them daily with Your Word. Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

For faithful parents, that You, our Father in heaven, would grant them patience and wisdom and give them the fortitude to train up their children in the way they should go. Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

For unborn children, that You, the Creator of life, would protect them and provide them with faithful and loving parents who, trusting in You, would welcome these great blessings with joy. Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

For Christian education agencies, that You, O eternal Wisdom, would bless churches with faithful pastors and teachers to engage adults and children alike in the study of Your Word. Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

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For those who are sick, marginalised, depressed, shut-in or in hospice care, [especially _____], that You, our gracious and merciful God, would guard and keep their faith strong, knowing with certainty that to live is Christ and to die is gain. Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

Into Your hands, O heavenly Father, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Season after **PENTECOST SERMON**

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Series A)

Sermon Text: Matthew 20:1-16

“The First Last And The Last First”

“All this He does out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.” So we confess in the Small Catechism’s explanation to the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed. Quite simply, our lives are a picture of God’s grace and mercy. And it’s to this reality that Jesus turns in today’s Gospel Reading with His parable of the workers in the vineyard.

However, in order to understand this more fully we must retreat a few verses earlier to the previous chapter where Peter says, *“See, we have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?”* Jesus said to them, *“Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for My name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”* Fittingly today’s Gospel Reading closes with an echo of this statement, as Jesus says: *“So the last will be first, and the first last.”*

He has spoken of His imminent arrest, suffering, death and resurrection in Jerusalem – the end goal of His ministry . . . of the greatness in the kingdom of heaven, in which the neediest is the greatest . . . and of a kingdom where God’s forgiveness does not end. And now He tells the disciples and all of us that under His reign as King the first are last, and the last first.

It is interesting that our Lord’s response to Peter’s question causes us to wonder further about the Last Day reality rather than receive a perfectly bundled response. In some way at the renewal of all things when Christ returns in glory as Judge of all, the 12 apostles, His first disciples, will participate with Him in this judgement over the people of God. Yet, in the parable of the workers of the vineyard we find that indeed the last are first . . . that there is no difference in the reign of God, the kingdom of heaven. So He

says: *“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.”*

Now, the vineyard owner starts early at 6 am to recruit dayworkers, agreeing to pay them a denarius each which was a fair wage at that time. He goes out again at the third hour or 9 am, the sixth hour (12 noon), and the ninth hour (3 pm) – agreeing to pay them what is right. Finally, at the eleventh hour or 5 pm, he recruits still others to work the last hour. Then, remarkably, the owner of the vineyard ordered his steward to pay the workers in reverse order – those working least to those who worked the entire day, each one receiving a denarius. But to those who worked the full day, this wasn't fair. *“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,”* so they complain.

And yes, dear workers in our Lord's vineyard, the kingdom of heaven isn't fair. If you want fair, you would be paid rightly for the wages of your sin. If you want fair, eternal death would be the end of you a sinner. If you want fair, you would never be allowed into our Lord's kingdom. What's the point? Just this: when it comes to the kingdom of heaven not now, and certainly not forever, do you get what you've earned. In a place that rewards those who are least, lost, and last . . . who are utterly dependent on the Father for everything, you receive by grace everything that the Lord of the vineyard has to offer no matter how long or how much you've worked in His vineyard. In fact, even now our Lord takes your sin, your pain, your guilt and places it all upon His own Son, and gives you His holy righteousness, His promises, His everlasting joy, and His perfect peace which passes all understanding.

‘But I've borne the brunt of the work. I come from generations of faithful Christians who have endured wars, deaths, upheavals, and countless relocations. What is more, my family and I built this church. And now these freeloaders are sharing in the spoils! Shouldn't our work count for something? Shouldn't we get more than them?’ That's the essential point of the parable – the lament expressed by those first workers, *“you made them equal to us.”*

That's the rub – the owner of the vineyard makes no distinction between his workers. This is what is offensive, even scandalous, about the parable that Jesus tells the apostles. A problem emerges only when the employees start comparing themselves to their fellow workers. For when they do so, such comparing reveals the danger of an envious and evil spirit. Such an attitude is like a person drowning in the middle of the ocean, who insists that he can swim the few thousand kilometres back to shore without any help, only to be saved by a helicopter rescue minutes before dying. Would he then complain, ‘Why did you save me? I was doing just fine!’ Or would he remark when the rescuer goes back to save others, ‘If you find others, just throw them a life raft. They don't deserve to be brought to safety.’

In like manner, if it was up to us, it would seem that the twelve apostles and the prophets of old would receive the greatest reward at Christ's return. Then perhaps the early church fathers and the other confessors of the faith like Martin Luther would be below them. Then would come the martyrs who have gave their lives for confessing Christ would be next. Then those who were faithful all their lives and were dedicated workers in the church would come next, and followed finally by those who confessed their faith in Christ only for a short time or even on their deathbed. That's what we would expect, isn't it?

But no, the kingdom of heaven isn't like that. In fact, you and I will receive the same reward as the great patriarchs in the faith . . . all believers in Christ will be abundantly blessed and receive eternal life. This is the great wonder of the kingdom of heaven. Think about it. When Christ returns we will join in the same reward along with the great crowd of saints filled with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Deborah, Mary, the mother of our Lord, Peter, James, and John – and St. Paul who writes in today's Epistle Reading these words: *"My desire is to depart and be with Christ."*

Indeed, *"without any merit or worthiness in me,"* as the catechism puts it, you and I have received this reward being washed at our baptism into Christ, kneeling at our Lord's altar and with open, unworthy hands and mouths to receive our Lord's body and blood. And in this same undeserving love at our Saviour's return we will receive all that our Lord has earned and won for us. So one commentator on our text puts it: "On the Last Day, the reign of God in Jesus will come in all its fullness. All who have been called as workers in the vineyard—all the disciples of Jesus, without distinction—will receive from the Master what He deems just, in accordance with His pledge when they were first called. Remarkably, all those who have left anything behind for the sake of Jesus' name will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. In light of His promise, all comparing now must be put aside. For this is how it is in the reign of God. The last will be first, and the first will be last."

And do you know what? The Lord God, who has no beginning or end, who is the Creator of all, made Himself the least and the last so that you, of all people, might share with all the saints of God in His eternal glory. Amen.