

Septuagesima
 January 31, 2010
 Ex. 17:1-7; I Cor. 9:26-10:5; Mtt. 20:1-16

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Our Gospel lesson for Septuagesima, which designates our time before Lent, is the parable of the vineyard. The new *Lutheran Study Bible*, and many others, summarizes this parable as, “The Laborers in the Vineyard.” It certainly isn’t wrong to summarize this parable that way, but it seems more appropriate to emphasize the Master of the Vineyard instead of the laborers. Jesus begins the parable itself with the Master. **“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. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.** The Master of the vineyard is a very gracious Man. He knew that day laborers depended on daily work to eat and survive. If they didn’t graciously receive work they and their families might go hungry. Day laborers didn’t even have it as well as those today that live paycheck to paycheck. They had no steady and sure income. Day laborers, then and now are sustained by the grace and mercy of employers and masters. So, the Master goes out early in the morning to the laborers who are passively and helplessly waiting for help to come to them.

The Master seeks the laborers and agrees with them to give a good, meet, and right wage for their day’s work in the vineyard. If the Master kept good on His promise to pay them, they would have their daily bread. **And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ 5 So they went.** So, the gracious Master returns to those day laborers who still hadn’t received work as their means of grace to receive money to buy food for the day. He graciously goes to them and brings them into His vineyard without any merit or worthiness in them and promises, **“Whatever is right I will give you.”**

Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. 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.’ What a gracious Master. You see, the Master is the one doing all of the action in the parable. He goes out time and time again seeking and showing underserved favor to the day laborers. Do you see how desperate their situation was? They were in a poor miserable situation. They couldn’t choose to work, but had to be chosen by a gracious master. Do you see how wonderful a master He is? He goes out continually, like a fisherman with large dragnet, and gathers these helpless men into His vineyard. Can you imagine an employer going out an hour before the end of the work day and hiring someone for an hour? Most employers would say that is a waste of time, it isn’t efficient; it isn’t good for the bottom line. Yet, this Master is more concerned for the men surviving than His own time and energy.

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.’ 9 And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received

a denarius. The Master fulfilled His promises to all of the day laborers. I doubt that many employers would be so generous to pay a full days' wage to someone who worked one hour. This Master, however, is very generous. He wants everyone in His vineyard to receive and enjoy His gracious generosity. The fact that any of the laborers could be in the vineyard was in itself gracious. No matter when they were brought into the vineyard, they were all equally helpless and lost without the visitation of the Master. They all could have been left standing around without salvation. The ones hired later in the day understood that. They knew that the Master gave them more than they could have asked for or ever dreamed of getting.

Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. 11 And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 12 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.' 13 But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' 16 So the last will be first, and the first last."

Now, it is easy to pick on these grumbling day laborers isn't it? But are we any better? Do we too think this way? Do we properly confess that we are equally helpless as the rest of the world in need of a saving Master? Or, do we think that we have put in our time and borne the burden of the day and so Jesus owes us something more than those who were brought to the vineyard later in the day? Do we think that it is our work that has earned us a special seat of honor in the Master's vineyard or that it is our hard work that keeps us there?

Keep in mind the events just prior to Jesus telling this parable. First, you have the disciples rebuking people for bringing their infants and children to Jesus. But Jesus responds with, **"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."** You see that entrance into the kingdom of heaven or vineyard is for helpless infants. And the truth is that we are all helpless infants and day laborers who need the Master to show us grace, not matter the hour. Right after this event the disciples hear Jesus respond to the rich young man who asks, **"Teacher what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"** In short, Jesus responds that to enter the vineyard you must keep the 10 Commandments. The self-righteous man thought he had borne the burden of God's Law, so Jesus heaped onto his back more Law and said, **"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will treasure in heaven; and come and follow me."** The Law of God, the 10 Commandments, would lead to heaven if we could keep them perfectly. And our flesh always thinks it can do something to earn something from God. We are the rich young man and the grumbling day laborers. However, we can't do anything to earn or sport in the vineyard or do anything to keep us there. The primary reason that God gives us the 10 Commandments isn't to show us how to work our way into His vineyard or how we can work real hard to remain in His kingdom. The primary reason for the Law is to show us that we are completely helpless and completely depended on the action of the Master. The Law is a heavy yoke that crushes all hope of us laboring for our salvation. The Law scorches everyone's chances of laboring for God's love. It would be easier for a camel to

go through the eye on a needle than for us to do what God demands we do to get into His vineyard. Jesus disciples get this for a moment. After the rich man departed in sorrow, finally seeing that He couldn't enter heaven by his labor, Jesus speaks to his disciple some more and then they rightly conclude, **“Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”**

Then after answering a question from Peter, Jesus concludes His response with these words, **“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”** These are the same words that Jesus ends our parable with. So, you have the parable of the vineyard sandwiched between Christ's emphatic phrases, **“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”**

If we think we should be first - if we think we have earned something from God - if we think we have kept the 10 Commandments more richly than the poor - if we think we are better than that dirty sinner who is standing idle all day while we work - if we think we deserve to be in the vineyard - if we think we deserve to remain in God's kingdom by our effort - we will be last. Repent.

The Law makes us all the same. The whole world is helpless without the Master. Whether we think we should be first or not, we are all indeed last. We are all poor and dead on the side of the road unless a good Master stops and picks us up. But just as the Law of God makes us equally damned, equally starving, equally helpless infants, and all poor beggars - the Gospel also makes us the same. For God so loved the whole world - all of it. Christ came down to us and obeyed God's Commandments perfectly. He did this for the laborers hired at the beginning of the day and those at the end. Jesus picked up the heavy yoke and burden of the Law and carried it sinlessly in the whole world's place. Christ lived a perfect life just the same for you, for His disciplines, for the rich young man, for helpless infants, and for helpless grumbling adults. And the same is true for His death and resurrection from the grave. Christ paid the debt that our sinful labors have earned. The sin of the entire world was placed on Jesus until He cried that salvation for the whole world was complete. And Christ was raised for our justification. For the sake of Christ, the whole world is declared righteous. No matter what you have done or left undone - no matter the hour - we are all equally declared righteous for Jesus' sake.

In our Baptism our Master gives all of us grumbling day laborers equal love, grace, forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. In Baptism we are equally, fully, and generously covered with the perfect life of the Master of the Vineyard. In Holy Communion He doesn't give some a little more forgiveness because they labored longer, but gives to all equally and generously based on the labor of Christ for all. We don't get forgiveness for only some of our sins or only for the sins that we feel Jesus is willing or able to forgive. We get the full payment of what Jesus earned for us by His life, death and resurrection - that is the forgiveness of all our sins. The same is in true when your Master comes to you in Holy Absolution. Not matter if you feel you are less worthy than other people - no matter if you think you are chief of sinners - it is for all of us chief of sinners that Christ came. He says to the last in Holy Absolution, “You are first.” Christ never sends the hungry away empty. He always sends us poor miserable sinners away with rich forgiveness. The gracious Master comes to us sinners, no matter the hour, generously bringing us into and sustaining us in His gracious vineyard. Amen.