

An Equal Share  
Matthew 20:1-16  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 20, 2020

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

Our text, He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you now 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.’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Gospel reading’s parable is bookended by an important thematic statement: we hear it at the end of the reading, but understandably didn’t recognize it as also coming before the reading at the end of chapter 19: “The last will be first, and the first last.” What does this mean?

The preceding chapter – though a different occasion and setting than the previous focus in chapters 16-18 on repentance and forgiveness – the preceding chapter again sees Jesus take notice of the children, not hinder them from his presence, but hint that *this* is what the kingdom of heaven looks like. A rich young man, not wanting to rely on the childlike humility of faith’s repentance and the grace of the forgiveness of sins, steps forward to prove his worth: “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” As Jesus points him to the commandments, the man claims to have kept all of them, and Jesus inspects his heart and responds (basically), “Give

away your money, for it is your idol; *then* you can learn humility before and dependency upon God Most High.” And the disciples (watching this) say, “If a good, rich person can’t get into heaven, who can?”

Notice how, in theory, we think we recognize the theology of the forgiveness of sins (as we heard so much about it in chapters 16-18), but in life we so quickly turn back to a salvation of merit and an individual’s goodness. And so, Jesus tells this parable to put in *visual* form what our Old Testament reading essentially says in *prophetic* form when it says,

“Let the wicked forsake his ways, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. **For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, declares the Lord.**”

Notice that last line... we use it so often to reassure ourselves that – though we don’t understand why God is allowing the world’s current events to go in ways we wouldn’t choose, nevertheless we can go on in daily life because we have confidence He’s in control. Yes, that’s our common general application of those words. But, consider again the context of that sentence in Isaiah: “Let the wicked forsake his ways, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return the LORD, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.” *Then* come the words, “For my

thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, declares the Lord.”

Notice the notion that God’s ways are not our ways nor his thoughts our thoughts... that notion is not just about God governing creation, it’s about God’s judgment over the wicked. In what ways are God’s ways not ours? – that the rich man cannot earn heaven by his good works? Or are “God’s ways not ours, nor thoughts ours” when He forgives abundantly and freely even those whose repentance comes after a life of sinful selfishness, when we would condemn those who seem to have gotten the best of both worlds and “unfairly” come to forgiveness ‘late in the day’?

That’s really what our Gospel parable is all about, isn’t it? It’s not really about ‘*working* for the same wage’... as if one Christian should *expect* to do a bunch of good works and get a certain merit badge for them while another does fewer good works for the same merit badge. That’s not the Christian faith! Such a teaching of meritorious righteousness may have shown up in or overtaken many church bodies over the centuries, but that’s not the teaching of Scripture!

Nor is this some cryptic hint that Jesus had a socialist politico-economic agenda, that all should get equal pay and equal outcome regardless of the sweat of the brow in life’s day. That doesn’t square with an equally Scriptural admonition: “A worker is due his wages;” and “Let him who does not work not eat.”

No, what Jesus illustrates is the life of faith that depends on the forgiveness of sins – a forgiveness of sins that produces the joy of faith that desires to live out good works of Christian love for the neighbor. Sometimes, that entrance into the forgiveness of sins and its flowing life of faith and works comes ‘early in the day’ – as a child is baptized in infancy, raised through catechesis, and is ‘rewarded’ with access to the Lord’s Table all his days. Other times, it comes late in life – an adult convert, say from atheism or a Christian heterodoxy that had encouraged him to ‘contribute’ to his salvation, that adult finally is converted into the truth that he *cannot* contribute to his salvation freely given in Christ Jesus, and only then begins to rejoice in the free and clear conscience that is his before God and thus *now* naturally flowing from such faith are the good works serving his neighbor in love and joy. Yes, sometimes that happens early in life, other times, later in life... just as another parable of Jesus hinted, that the Word produces fruit in its hearers, with some bearing hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. That may not be a comment exclusively about *quality* of the individual’s faith but could also indicate *chronology* of faith. And yet, is God’s mercy weighted, a progressive standard of grace, so that the one who has lived most of his life in idolatry and faithlessness leading to stubbornness giving way to emptiness and despair...that that one should be less blessed by God’s mercy in Christ Jesus than the one who was so blessed to

be raised in a Lutheran home? Not in God's way of thinking or working!

Now, we can agree with Him on that one... that's simple, at least on paper. But, how often in life do our ways and our thoughts lead to something *other* than a desire for free forgiveness 'no matter the time of the day'? How often in life do we forget the blessings and focus on the cross-bearing of such Christian life and thus almost become envious of those who are brought to salvation late in life's day.

In fact, if these spiritual benefits of forgiveness, life and salvation are such good gifts being given by God, if he is lavishing us with His love as His dear children, why does Jesus depict the individuals of the parable as laborers? Why does he depict *them* as having expectation of 'payment' of sorts? I suppose the answer lies in your own heart and why you sometimes get frustrated that those who have not been faithful members in the Church, devoting time, talent, treasures suddenly are equal beneficiaries to you and receive all the rights and benefits of citizenship in the household of God!

And, why *does* that frustrate you? Why does that burn you? Isn't it because you recognize that the life of faith is not easy. You have been called to a life of "*comforted by Christ,*" not a life of "*comfortable because of Christ.*" You are called to benefit from and fix your eyes on Christ Jesus, no matter what the world offers and sells and rewards you for following *its* promises. And, the psalmist

says, “It is better to trust in the Lord than to trust in princes,” and yet you so often and easily find yourself saying, “Yes, but life would be much easier if the Lord would allow it to be easier and more comfortable.” And we’d rather He not seem so far removed from and tone-deaf toward the difficulty we face in living as Christians in an increasingly non-Christian society and, indeed, a non-Christian world.

And that’s why Jesus uses the language of ‘good works’ and ‘labor’ in this parable... because we sense in our own limbs that the Christian life in a Christ-less world is not easy. It more often feels like work to remain faithful and leisure to give up the faith. It more often promises pain to *confess* Christ before men, and pleasure to *give up* Christ before men. As St Paul says in our epistle reading, “It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him *but also suffer for his sake*, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” Yes, if you find yourself with an unsettling feeling that maybe American society is about to plunge into godlessness, anarchy, or the victory of whoever cheats the most, and if you have an uncomfortable feeling that the life of the Church is in the process of losing its rather comfortable status in this land, do you not hear and see that the whole Church (including Paul) has always known the same lot, has always known the labor of confessing Christ and suffering for that confession, has always known – as the servants of the text exclaim – “the burden of the day and

the scorching heat”? And then, to see someone *newly* and *recently* and perhaps *in life’s latter days* come into that confession and – not having had to risk life and limb for it to this point – to nevertheless receive all the same benefits even though they’ve come late in life’s day, sometimes our Old Adam gets the better of us and is bitter that we’ve long lived under the intense temptation and pressure to give up the faith, to just ‘live life to its fullest,’ to ‘save our reputation and fit in with the crowd,’ to ‘go along to get along’... we’ve long lived under that weight, resisted it, sacrificed much to safeguard against it... and our Old Adam is not so thrilled that someone new to the faith in life’s late days need not know the lifelong cross-bearing of those placed into the Church in life’s infancy.

Have we forgotten that such infant baptism and being raised up in that baptismal life grants us abundant blessings and divine safeguarding no temporal gains can equal? Have we forgotten that and, instead, only feel the weariness and isolation of having confessed Christ before men, maybe even to and before these very men joining late in the day? Can we actually grow bitter that the great benefit of such confession equally belongs to *them*, the newcomer to the faith?

Perhaps this is why we also don’t like that this parable can be so easily misinterpreted in a very ‘antinomian’ manner of saying, “I’ll sow my wild oats and ‘live life to its fullest’ now, then repent and be received and showered with full benefits *later*.” Of course, that

forgets the Scriptural context of all those other parables we'll hear anew soon enough... parables that tell us to keep alert, keep awake, because the end will come suddenly... parables that put in 'story form' (if you will) what the prophet Isaiah spoke quite plainly hundreds of years earlier: "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near."

Indeed, may we never assume there will be a tomorrow to repent. Let us never assume there will be another day in which the Lord will graciously shower upon this land His precious gospel. To be sure, those whose lives are defined by and lived out around the pulpit and altar of God will always have the promise, "Lo, I am with you always." So long as you gather and call upon the LORD, that faith will not be put to shame. But, those *outside* the communion of saints, those who believe the day will never come to an end and they'll always be able to slide into faith's "Get out of jail free" card at 11:59, those who have failed to hear Christ himself who said, "As long as it is day, let us work the works of Him who sent Me. Night is coming, when no one can work" – for those who have forgotten that Christ's Church is always praying "Come quickly, Lord Jesus" and Christ *will* one day answer His Church suddenly – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, as a thief in the night... for those who forget that, the day of salvation that is *today* will abruptly become the *yesterday* of salvation, and the gospel will have passed by.

Martin Luther famously spoke of the Gospel as a passing rain shower, refreshing the lands for a time, then moving on and leaving behind a dryness that leads to drought that leads to death. It's happened to Israel, to the Roman Empire, to Reformation Europe, and is happening to so much of western civilization as its inhabitants yawn at the call to "Seek the Lord while he may be found."

Let us instead heed St Paul: "Now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." Thus, "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

And as you meditate upon what joy and relief it is that you have been spared by the blood of Christ – that though the road is wide, the gate is narrow and you have been given access before the gate closes... then rejoice equally with and for those who have also been spared *late* in life's day when the gates were even more nearly closed. And rejoice with them that – with whatever earthly life left God has granted them – they may joyfully serve in His kingdom, through labors of love and works that are truly good... as servants with a free conscience of salvation and safety before the judgment seat of God.

For, now that you and they alike have been given safety by God Most High at his font, pulpit and altar, now you know exactly what St Paul means when he wrote to the Philippians, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me." Fruitful labor so that others, too, even in this

late hour, Paul hints, “may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus.” For, if they who have been granted such good things so as to have ample cause to glory in Christ – if they have been granted nothing more than an equal share in Christ – then doesn’t that mean that you, too, have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus? ... ample cause to relish the grace of God toward you in Christ Jesus? ... ample reason to cherish the faith gifted you by the Holy Spirit and handed down to you by the saints? ... ample reason to say, “For *every* hour that my life has been carried in baptism, for *every* hour that my life will be carried in baptism unto that never-ending day... I have never-ending reason to equally rejoice with my fellow Christian and, together, glory in Christ Jesus.”

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul  
Calvary Lutheran Church  
September 20, 2020