

September 24, 2017
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“No Deserving”

Matthew 20:1-16

At first glance, nobody likes this parable of Jesus. Well, okay, maybe lazy people like this parable, but hard-working folks think it kind of stinks. Who wouldn't?

Most of us have been there. You know, that school project where you're teamed up with a few classmates and there's that one who barely does anything, yet shares in the final grade; that person at work who does the bare minimum to get by, but still has seniority so gets the raises and promotions anyway, that person sitting on the board or committee with you that talks a good game, but when it comes to doing the actual nuts and bolts work is nowhere to be found. Meanwhile, you're busting your hump to get the job done. There is a reason we give the slacker the evil eye, and reason we don't like this parable.

However, to properly receive this parable we have to step back and understand what it is describing. Jesus starts out saying, *“The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”* This story isn't about how the world operates. This story isn't about how your life is supposed to function. This story is about how the reigning of God is breaking into the world through God's Son Jesus Christ. This story is about how salvation breaks into history in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and claims people for blessed eternity in Christ.

I hope everyone here understands that salvation is not the reward for your faithful work. The work that acquires salvation is all and only the work of Christ to the cross and through the tomb. It is through this Gospel message that you are called to God's vineyard—called into the kingdom and adopted by grace through faith as a child of God. This is all gift—it is the master's generosity. This parable is a warning to Christ's disciples to keep that in mind.

God's duty is only that to which He has obligated Himself by His own Word and promise. What are these wonderful promises? *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.”* *“This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”* *“Whoever comes to Me I will never cast out.”*

There are no qualitative limitations in these promises. There are no ranking of the level of blessings given in these promises. These are not promises of some merit-based compensation depending on the quality and duration of your service to God. The blessing is Christ crucified and the entirety of salvation which His sacrifice brings. (pause) Isn't that enough?

Who answers, “No, it isn't”?

You see, that's the warning. In our sinful self-centeredness we are in danger of failing to look at this wonderful blessing and see, receive and adore the gift but instead look around at the others also receiving it and think we somehow deserve better.

The simplest example is obvious and it's the way I was taught about this parable in Sunday school; somebody who has been a faithful Christian their whole life should not resent someone who comes to the faith late in life for receiving the same grace from God. This is true. But quite frankly, I've never found that to be much of a problem among disciples of Jesus. When we have adult baptisms or even when lapsed congregation members return to regular worship I don't see a lot of resentment. I see smiles and hear rejoicing.

So I think this may come into play when we attempt to measure and judge the quality of the faith of other disciples. This I may have seen. I've seen the knowledgeable in Christian

doctrine deride the less knowledgeable. I've heard those volunteering for just about everything at church lament those who come only for Sunday worship. I've seen little bursts of outrage from a good Christian person over another Christian's breach of proper church etiquette.

I'm not saying this is sin. Quite frankly I'd like some of you to learn your doctrine better, volunteer at church more, and yeah, church etiquette isn't a bad thing to observe. But if you're equating such attitudes with having a superior faith in Christ—a faith that warrants some better disposition and dispensation from God because I'm a “good” servant and he or she is a lazy one—well guess what; the last will be first, and the first last.

In other words, your elevation of self is actually working against you in the eyes of the Almighty. It is not pleasing to Him. Your job is to love your brother or sister in Christ, not pass judgment upon him or her. When you judge their faith, you're pushing yourself into the place of God...and if you remember, that's what brought all creation down in the first place.

The problem with the first-called servants wasn't their work. It was their attitude. The master asks, “*Do you begrudge my generosity?*” A more literal translation of the original biblical Greek is, “Do you evil eye my generosity?” and I think that puts things in a really good perspective.

If we look at another disciple and think he or she less deserving of God's grace than us, we're not just passing judgment on them. We're passing judgment on God. We're seeing a defect in the way He gives grace in Christ. We're giving the evil eye to His generosity. In that, we're forgetting one crucial part of the parable.

Nobody was in the vineyard. It was the master who came out and brought them in with the promise of blessing.

Nobody was in God's kingdom. All had fallen short of the glory of God in their sin. It was God who came and gathered us at the cost of His Son into our humanity to suffer and die in our place. This is gift. This is grace. Can you now turn and give God's grace the evil eye because you think you deserve something more? Of course not! Far be it from us Lord!

Are there more faithful Christians and less faithful Christians. Sure. Are there Christians who commit sin more than other Christians? Probably. Are there lazy Christians trying to slip in under the wire of God's grace while others are struggling to work out their salvation with fear and trembling? I'd say yes. Have they all been called by the Gospel of Christ to repent in faith and receive forgiveness, life and salvation? Most definitely yes.

Is it your job to judge which Christian is which? No. In fact, if you're even looking that direction your head is turned the wrong way and you're dangerously close to being full of yourself and giving God the evil eye. Look to the gift. Look to Christ. In Him you see the goodness of His grace in dying in love to save you for His kingdom. When you see your sins being forgiven, you cannot begrudge His generosity.

Whenever I ponder this parable, I can't help but recall a memorable line from a Clint Eastwood western ironically entitled “Unforgiven.” His rather unsavory character Bill Munny at the climax of the film says, “Deserve's got nothing to do with it.”

This is true. No one deserves to be called into the kingdom of heaven. The master calls you anyway. Focus on that, not on the deserve or undeserving of anyone else. Simply receive your master's generosity, rejoice and be glad.

Amen.