

In the name of Jesus; Amen.

In the verse right after our Epistle for today, St. Paul reminds us that with most of the Israelites, “God was not pleased.” These people whom God had chosen, who were baptized into Moses in the cloud and sea, who received the spiritual food and drink from the same One who set our tables each week, God was not pleased with them. Why? Because these believers, they heard God’s Word, received His Baptism, and ate His Supper. But they spurned it. They were idolaters, sexually immoral, tempters of God, and complainers who did not appreciate the great promises God gave to them. Yes, they were amazed that the Lord had defeated their Egyptian enemies with plagues, by the angel of death, through the red sea. And yet, they grumbled against God. They tested Him. Why did He lead them out only for them to get hungry? So God fed His children. Why did God lead them out of Egypt only to thirst? So God gave water to His people. But Israel missed the point. They thought God owed it to them. He led them out, so He better take care of them. They grumbled and were unsatisfied with God because they were a bit entitled. It would not do if God let them get hungry and thirsty. They thought they had a right to His grace. They did not receive God’s miracles as mercy. They saw it as their right. It was about time God started measuring up to what they wanted. And so what God gave as a gift, they took as what they thought was their due.

God owed them nothing. He didn’t even owe Abraham, their ancestor with whom God made a promise, to make his descendants great. There was nothing Moses, the Israelites, Abraham, or Adam ever did to make God owe them. Instead, when Adam fell, God promised a Savior. When Abram was called from idolatry, God gave a promise to make him great. When Moses led, God promised to be with him. When the Israelites grumbled, God promised safety, food, and drink. That is what they lived and died on. God’s promise, His Word to His people, His grace. But His people don’t deserve it. They never have. We never will. God is far too good to us for reasons only He knows. We call that mercy.

God does not owe it to us to forgive us. Daniel knows this well. What belongs to the Lord is righteousness, but to us, shame of face for we sin and do not heed the Word of God preached, taught, and read in our midst. To us belongs shame of face, for we often depart from God’s commandments, His precepts, His right ordering of the world and our lives. But to the Lord our

God belongs mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him. We don't deserve to hear His forgiveness, receive the body and blood of Christ for our life. There was nothing special about us that God sent His Son to die for us. And there is nothing we can do to earn His favor. He doesn't give us His Word or forgiveness or Church or Son because we did a good job keeping the commandments, or going to church, or not saying bad words, or were nice to people, loved our family, worked hard to be a Christian. We get the good stuff because He is good, not us. We may think, "God, I am a Christian, your child. You owe me. I am suffering, I am uncertain, miserable, in pain, depressed, anxious, angry, doubting. It's about time that you help me. I deserve your help for thinking you are real, holding out a hope that you care, even trying to trust you. Reward me. After what I am going through I deserve it!" But we don't. It is pure grace from God. And He is lavish about it. He gives freedom to slaves without hope, food to those who grumble, water to those who test, grace to the undeserving, forgiveness to sinners.

This is a lesson we do well to take to heart: God does not think like us. He is not *quid pro quo*, He doesn't give to you only what you give to Him, He does not give you only what your money can buy. And thank God for that. For we all, as sinners, have nothing to pay God with, nothing to give Him. Sinners are bankrupt. But God gives the winning ticket to the lottery to us anyway. Even after His own reject Him, mock Him, hate Him, beat Him, crucify Him. The Gospel reading for today is not teaching you justice. If it was, the workers would be left starving and die. Instead, Jesus, this morning, teaches us grace.

A landowner needs help with his vineyard. It is harvest time and he needs to bring the crop in now, this is the opportune time. So he goes out before the workday starts at 6 a.m. morning and hires workers. It is interesting where the landowner finds most of his workers: standing around in the marketplace. This is the center of the village, where the activity of everyday business happens. They are standing around, waiting for someone to hire them. It is much like today, when people who are in need of money wait in areas they know owners or landlords can see them. They typically hire themselves out for manual labor, like landscaping, or moving, or demolition. Similarly, these workers of the vineyard are the general laborers of society, willing to work any job, no matter how grueling, even if it was, as we hear, in the heat of the day, if it meant they and their families could live. The landowner makes a contract with the first group of men, agreeing to pay them a denarius for their labor, standard payment, the average day wage, around \$75. But notice that the terms change a bit when the master of the house

travels back to the marketplace. He goes out again at 9 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m. only saying that he will give to the laborers whatever is right. No money is agreed upon. When he goes again at 5 p.m., one hour before the workday ends, he doesn't promise the workers anything. He just tells them to go to the vineyard and work.

Then comes the end of the workday at 6 p.m. A 12-hour workday for some. For others it was a 9-hour, or 6-hour, or 3-hour, or even 1-hour workday. Now the pay is to be given. You can only imagine the workers eagerly lining up, with those who worked last going first and those who worked first going last. As the first men, those who worked for 1 hour, walked away pocketing their denarius, the men at the end of the line who worked for 12 hours are getting excited: if those guys received a denarius, surely we are going to receive more!

What is good, right, and just in this situation? According to what we think, the men who worked longer should get more money. Yet, Jesus tells us, they receive a denarius also. These men grumble and complain to the landowner. They worked the hardest, the longest, during the heat of the day, doing most of the work. These workers hunger and thirst for more money, grumble and test the master. But the landowner gave them what they agreed to: the contract read, one denarius. He made no such agreement with the others. He only promised to give them what was right.

What?! Is that really lawful? God's way is no way to run a business. But it is the way the kingdom of God works. The kingdom of God is where the undeserving and lazy who don't work get someone else's reward. It is where sinners receive the work of Christ: forgiveness, life, and salvation. It is no coincidence that the words of the landowner and Jesus blend together at the end of the parable. For Jesus gives to you His things and they become yours. Jesus gives you His perfect life, all the favor and love and grace of God that is His as the Son of God, the Beloved Son, that is all yours. He reconciles you to God, He gives you eternal life.

The ones who worked all day agreed to a denarius. They got what they agreed to, what they bargained for. But that is a terrible thing. They got what was just. They were sent away with what they deserved, not with the grace of the master. We do not want to be sent as those workers were. We do not want what we deserve, what is just. What sinners earn is damnation for our sins. We do not want to be the grumbling workers sent away.

God's grace is found in the promise. The master promises that He will give the other workers what is right. And the workers who go with one hour left in the day are even told what

they will receive. They go in faith, trusting the master. And they are paid more than they deserve. They are given what is right. They are given the grace of God. God's merciful gifts of Jesus, forgiveness from sin, death, and the devil, life and hope, peace and joy are not ours to demand. They are not owed us. They are God's to give. And He gives more than we deserve. He gives you what is right, even though you have not earned it: He gives you forgiveness and new life in Jesus.

In the kingdom of God, the goal is not money, comparisons, long hours. In the kingdom of God, eternal life is what it is all about. And when it comes to eternal life the issue is not about what you earn, but what you are given. That is the focus of the parable. When the workers point out the unfairness of what they *earned*, the landowner instead points to the fact that what he *gave* was good and right.

This forgiveness, love, and eternal life is exactly the same for every person, no matter when they are brought to trust in Jesus Christ as the Savior of all, as their Savior. You may think it is not right or just that someone who is on death row for serial murder or rape should receive the same grace and forgiveness and better life to come as you who have done none of these things. You may not think it is right that someone who has recently come to faith will be just as loved and reconciled as you who have been a Christian even longer. You may not think it is right that the grumblers and gossipers of Lutheran congregations should get the same grace of God that you who love your church and invest in it do. You may not think that it is right that you, who have loved God for so long, should have such suffering in your life. But the kingdom of God does not run on what we think is just and right. It runs on what God knows is gracious and righteous.

Jesus Christ is true to His Word, just as the landowner was. Jesus says, "I offer eternal life to all, peace and rest to all, from the most troubled to the most secure. In me find God's grace. In me see the kingdom of God." There is no such thing as more eternal life, more love, more grace, more mercy in the kingdom of God. We all receive the same gift, and our work in the vineyard does not change that. It does not add to or make better Jesus' death and resurrection for us.

As we close, consider that we are in what is called the pre-Lenten season of the church year, sandwiched between Epiphany and Lent for 3 weeks. During this time the church has a missions emphasis, on how the Word of God is for all people, and we should diligently pray that all hear the blessed news of Jesus Christ reconciling all people to God, and forgiving them their

sins. So, attend to your work in the vineyard. Do the work of a Christian. Run in such a way that you may obtain the prize, not that you flirt with being disqualified from God's kingdom. Live as God would have you. Love those God has given you. Speak and think, talk and act like Jesus matters to you, because He does. He has given you grace. Grace is undeserved, unearned, and quite often unexpected. Even when we have selfish, angry, and skeptical hearts, God gives His grace and it exceeds what we deserve and imagine. We do the same. We are gracious to those who do not deserve it, who have not earned anything from us. We show how much grace and the Gospel mean to us, by giving it to others. Bring your friends and family, the doubting and the skeptical, the angry and the sad, or any person with you to church to receive Jesus' grace. We seek to bring the Gospel to our neighborhoods. That is what we offer to our communities and makes us distinct: we offer Jesus Christ, the Savior of all. And He gives grace to all. It does not matter if people come at the 3<sup>rd</sup> hour, or the 6<sup>th</sup> hour, or the 9<sup>th</sup> hour, or the 11<sup>th</sup>. No hour is too late to hear the saving message that God forgives your guilt, that He has a purpose for your life, and that He has prepared a better one to come. This is the glorious promise of God's grace in Jesus. The message of Jesus Christ and the gift of eternal life is the same for all people. It is not a matter of if we have earned God's grace. We haven't. It is a matter of if God has given it. And He has.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; Amen.