

16th Sunday after Pentecost

9/20/20

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Are You Part of the First or the Last?

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

The text is Matthew 20:16

¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last." (Mat 20:16 ESV)

You are the manager of a McDonald's restaurant. You hire three women to work at 8:00 am and then hire additional men at noon, 2:00 pm and 5 pm. The shift for everyone ends at 6:00 pm but you pay each of them the same amount of salary. I guarantee that you will be getting a call from some governmental agency because you broke the laws of equal salary for equal time regardless of gender.

We all heard the parable of the landowner who paid workers the same amount whether they worked for 12 hours or for one hour. You heard the complaints from those who had been hired first:

¹⁰ *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.'* (Mat 20:10-12 ESV)

In verse 16 Jesus says:

¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last." (Mat 20:16 ESV)

The question for this sermon is are you part of the first or the last?

From a selfish point of view you would probably answer last because you end up getting a full salary for lesser time spent in working. But is that the proper application of the parable? Some theologians imagine that this parable is about Judgment Day at which time regardless of your work in the Church, you all received the same reward of an eternity in heaven. However, that cannot be the proper interpretation because of verse 11:

¹⁰ 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,
(Mat 20:9-11 ESV)*

If this parable speaks of what some would be saying is what happens in heaven, that would contradict the Bible that states because all those in heaven will be in perfect bliss, there will be no grumbling against God for any reason. Therefore those who think this parable is about Judgment Day conclude that because of the grumbling against God by the first workers, they must be unbelievers and going to hell.

But then we have another problem. If those who grumble against God are going to hell, then that would mean that everyone in this congregation are on the way to hell. For every one of us grumble against God as we ourselves confess that we deserve nothing but temporal and eternal punishment. For sin is nothing else that a grumbling against God because we do not want to obey His will.

Remember who Adam blamed when he fell into sin? Most think he blamed Eve. But listen carefully to His complaint Genesis 3:verse 12:

¹² The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." (Gen 3:12 ESV)

Each time we blame someone or something else for our sin, we are in reality grumbling at God for the position He has put us in. Proper repentance is acceptin all the credit for our sin as our own fault. Then how are we to understand this parable?

Another interpretation must be advanced which will allow the proper importance to this parable. The only one that does this is that which gives a national, not simply an individual, bearing to the story. According to this exposition, it applies to the calling of the Jews and the Gentiles. The "penny" which all receive is the favour of God, the privileges that crown and reward the members of his kingdom. God's ancient people were first called to work in his vineyard. The various hours of the day cannot be accurately explained. Many interpreters follow St. Gregory in defining the first hour as extending from Adam to Noah, the third from Noah to Abraham, the sixth from Abraham to Moses, the ninth from Moses to the coming of Christ, the eleventh from the

coming of Christ to the end of the world. During all the day, up to the eleventh hour, the call was primarily to the Jews. In the eleventh hour the Gentiles are called, and, accepting the call, receive the same privileges as the Jews.

That the Jews murmured at the admission of the Gentiles to the kingdom of God and the Father's favour, we are taught in many places. The discontent of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son is a case in point. So in [Acts 13:45, 46](#), the Jews are filled with envy that the Word should be spoken to and accepted by heathens, and St. Paul ([1 Thessalonians 2:16](#)) complains that the Jews forbade him and his fellow apostles "to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved."

The most important verses are 13 & 14 in which Jesus says:

'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. (Mat 20:13-14 ESV)

The parable is not about Judgment Day and the reaction of those going to heaven. It is about what happens in the Kingdom of God here on earth called the holy Christian Church. It is a warning to the apostles that they are not to expect as their due something supereminent over those called later than themselves; that the reward is not of merit, but of free grace.

Christ is teaching that every one who has been called before others ought to run with so much the greater humility exhorting all Christians to be modest, not to give themselves the preference above others, but willingly to share with them a common prize. As the apostles were the first-fruits of the whole church, they appeared to possess some superiority; and Christ did not deny that they would *sit as judges to govern the twelve tribes of Israel*. But that they might not be carried away by ambition or vain confidence in themselves, it was necessary also to remind them that others, who would long afterwards be called, would be partakers of the same glory, because God is not limited to any person, but calls freely whomsoever He pleases, and bestows on those who are called whatever rewards He thinks fit.

This week an alarming incident took place at the Western Illinois University when one student shot another. It is easy for us to think of ourselves superior to that student since almost all of us do not go around shooting others. This parable is to remind us that God and our regard of that student can make a huge difference in him as he may be led to repent and fall on the grace of God for forgiveness and healing. We may not harm by action but the Sermon on the Mount teaches we harm by thought or word.

You see, the question whether you are of the first or the last is answered with an affirmative: "Yes, I am of both categories" for the parable is clear that both the first and the last enter into heaven for God promised that result in light of our faith in Jesus.

It's also an attitude that we can have this afternoon in calling a full-time pastor. For what we are looking for is one who is most competent in preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments. And in that regard we pray the Holy Spirit will properly guide the Voters in their selection who will teach salvation by grace, not merit.

Amen. And may the peace of God that passes all understanding.....

Prayer of the Church 16th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20A) 20 Sept 2020

That we may seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him in the day of salvation, and be prepared by His mercy for the Day of Judgment, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

That we may delight in the light of Christ and His salvation, and that sinners may find refuge in His choosing us in the Church, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

That we may hear the voice of God speaking in His Word and be nurtured by faithful pastors who preach and teach this Gospel, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

That this Word may be the foundation of the home, that husband and wife may be united in this faith and hope, and that their children may hear and be nurtured in this Word by faithful parents, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

That we may enjoy the blessing of good government, faithful leaders, peace in our land and peace among the nations, and that we may be good citizens and neighbors, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

That the sick may be healed especially _____ the troubled know peace, the grieving be comforted and the dying be delivered to everlasting life in Christ, and that we may all be delivered from fear, anxiety and despair by God's gracious care, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

That we may commune in faith, that no unrepentant sin may hinder our reception of Christ's body and blood, and that the fruits of this communion may be reflected in a manner of life in keeping with who we are as God's children by Baptism and faith, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

That in our Voters meeting today we may be led by the Holy Spirit to extend a call to a pastor who will be faithful in teaching the Word and administering the Sacraments for the good of the membership; let us pray to the Lord, **Lord have mercy.**

Hear the prayers of Your people, O Lord, and grant to us all things good and wholesome and keep from us all things harmful. Give us contentment, that trusting in Your mercy we may delight in Your saving will where the last are made first by Your generosity and grace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**