

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

27th Sunday of Quarantine (28 Overall)

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

09/20/2020

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first

came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

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

Fairness

Good morning! At 8:30 this morning the historical 24 hours of Le Mans finished. Congratulations to Toyota for winning 3 overall races 3 years in a row. I’ve always loved motorsports, and after being postponed from its usual time back in June, the race started yesterday morning. Formula 1 is my personal favorite racing series, because what’s not to love! But the endurance racing of the Le Mans series is always astounding. Here in the USA we’re familiar with long races like the Coca-Cola 600 in NASCAR, which sees cars travel 600 miles, but the 24 hour races take it to a whole new level. As the cars drive around the famous Circuit de la Sarthe in

Le Mans, France they will travel an average of 3,300 miles! The challenge has always been for the mechanics and engineers to create a car that can survive that type of abuse. Each car has three drivers, and so while only one person at a time is in the driver's seat, it's very much a team sport. Each car comes with a collection of engineers, mechanics, support staff, strategists, etc. Millions of dollars have been put into getting these cars to the race, and it's the job of the drivers to get those cars across the finish line. A team's hopes can be crushed in three different ways: they can make a mistake and crash, the car can break down, or the car can be the victim of bad luck. We saw this third option yesterday evening when the rear wing, or spoiler, detached off an LMP2 car and flew back into another car, causing damage to the innocent car and ending its hopes of finishing the race.

I cannot even begin to imagine the frustration that one would feel. You have literally done everything right. The car was made reliably, you have spent months or years getting financial backing from companies, after shakedown and practice sessions you've dialed in the car to perform at its peak, and the drivers have been doing everything they're supposed to do! They have driven smoothly and consistently, only for all that to be thrown down the drain when the mistake of someone else crushes your hopes and dreams. That's just not fair!

Well, as we've been told time and time again, life just isn't fair. Such is the situation for the workers in our Gospel text this morning. The landowner sends the manager out in the morning to hire workers for the harvest. They agree on a price of 1 denarius, which as we discussed last

week, was the average pay for one day of work.¹ They begin working, and periodically throughout the day the manager or landowner goes out and finds others who are standing around. So he hires them too. He continues this pattern until the last hour of work. When the day is over, they are lined up awaiting pay, when the landowner decides to pay them in order of those who came last. So when the ones who have only worked for one hour are paid an entire day's wage, the rest of the workers are noticeably excited. But that's not what happens, all the way down the line the workers all receive a single denarius. The ones that were originally hired have been working from 6am until 6pm! A 12 hour shift! And we're not talking a few days a week. For 6 days they would have worked for 12 hours straight. I think I would be equally upset. To quote the great Douglas R.A. Hare: "*The parable is offensive to us; it challenges our sense of justice.*"² And while I only have a major in theology and religious studies, I'm fairly confident that this isn't a great way to run a business. I doubt that it's a sustainable model for the landowner.

I immediately begin to wonder what's going on behind the scenes. Why aren't the workers all hired at the beginning of the day? As our Bible study this past Monday observed, it's easy to get caught up in all of this. Father Harrington, writing about what the last group hired says to the landowner writes this: "*The response of the last group is puzzling. Why did the householder not hire a full complement of workers? Why did he need*

¹ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 290.

² Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 290.

*more workers so late in the day? Was it because the work was so pressing or because the first workers did not work efficiently? These questions, while interesting, fail to take the story on its own terms.”*³

So, if speculation won't answer our questions, maybe we're speculating about the wrong thing. If this story isn't about best business practices, what is it about? Our answer is right in the opening verse of the text: *1 “The kingdom of heaven is like...”* Our text is about the kingdom of heaven, and so it's not concerned with earthly definitions of fairness. Harrington writes that: *“The issue treated in the parable is why the latecomers receive the same reward as those who came earlier to work. The answer is that the kingdom is God's gift to give and we must not begrudge God his generosity... There is a balance between God's justice and God's mercy. Those who were hired first receive a just reward, one to which they already agreed. The fact that the latecomers received the same rewards can be credited to God's mercy.”*⁴

This story is about more than just our understanding of God's salvation at the end of time. When we look at the story from that perspective it becomes an easy pill to swallow. “Well! It's not a big deal! Those who follow God at the end of their lives get the same reward as those who have been following God all their lives!” But this story is about so much more! It has dramatic repercussions for how we live now! Jesus tells us time and time again that the kingdom of heaven is right here, right now! It's

³Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 283.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 284-285.

not some far away thing that happens after we die! It challenges the system of “justice” that we all follow and twists our understanding upside down.

Furthermore, the story turns the focus back on God! Always be sure to keep God the subject of the active verb right? Well, this text goes to show us that God can do whatever God wants to do! God has given us life simply out of the joy of creation, and the gift of God’s kingdom comes to any whom God decides to bless! It’s a shock to our system, a glass of cold water thrown in our face. It’s not about us at all, it’s about God. And when we’re snapped back to the wonderful reality of the kingdom of heaven that shines all around us, we’re reminded of the wonder and beauty of what God has done, of the simple goodness of what we see. Thanks be to God. Amen.