

Matthew 20.1-16
Septuagesima
28 January 2018
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The biggest mistake people make in reading and understanding parables is trying line up everything in the parable with something having to do with God and His kingdom. But every parable has what theologians call a *tertium comparationis*. There's one thing, and one thing only, in the parable that's supposed to be compared to another thing having to do with God and His kingdom. Miss that, and not only will it make the parable finally completely unintelligible; it'll often turn you into a heretic.

That's the first thing I hope you'll leave knowing today. Because it's something you can apply to every single parable Jesus teaches.

Take the parable of the pearl of great price. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven should be compared to the merchant searching for pearls. And yet, how often that gets turned on its head so that you have to be the merchant, the pearl is supposed to be the kingdom, and so you're supposed to work your way to possessing the kingdom. All that does is fill you with false belief, cast you back on your own doing and thinking and emoting and away from Christ. Instead, the kingdom of heaven is like the merchant searching for pearls. That is, kingdom of heaven goes out and the love of God does not find, but creates, what is pleasing to it. And then the kingdom of heaven calls what it creates, faith in Christ, a pearl of great value.

So I think you get the point. We have to listen to what Jesus says. Words matter. *Every* word matters. And we can't fill them with whatever meaning we'd like to assign to them.

So it is with the parable for today. Lose track of the thread, and pretty soon you'll think it's a parable about what it's not about. You turn into a parable about a vineyard. Or a parable about the workers. Or a parable about the hours. Or the heat of the sun. Or the steward who gives the workers their pay. And that the kingdom of heaven should be understood from that perspective. But it's not about any of that.

Instead, listen to exactly what Jesus says, and find the *tertium comparationis*: "The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard."

Did you find the *tertium*? Not the laborers. Not the vineyard. But the master of the house.

In other words, if we're going to find out anything about the kingdom of heaven, with a single mind we have to focus on the master of the house.

So hear the story that way:

The kingdom of heaven is like a master of house.

That master makes agreements. In other words, he makes promises. He says to one group: "I'll give you a denarius for working in the vineyard."

A few hours later, he tells another group the same thing. "I'll give you a denarius for working in the vineyard."

A few hours later, again, he does the same exact thing. He promises a denarius for working in the vineyard.

And even later yet—with just one hour of work left to go—he finds some more workers and promises a denarius for their work.

And then—watch it!—he delivers on his promise. The guys hired at the eleventh hour get their denarius at day's end. The guys hired at the ninth, the same. The guys at the sixth, the same. The guys at the third, the same. The guys at the start of the day, the same. *According to the master's promise.*

And there we have the character and nature of the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is a promise made. And the kingdom of heaven is a promise kept.

The kingdom of heaven is God's promise to you written in the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, that your sins are forgiven.

The kingdom of heaven is God's promise to you inscribed on the wall of an empty grave that all dead will rise—both believers and unbelievers.

The kingdom of heaven is God's promise to you your heavenly bridegroom has gone to His Father's house to prepare a room for all believers in Christ, and to take His bride the Church there with Him when He returns.

The kingdom of heaven is God's promise to you that you are never alone in this life. That walking in the way of the cross, in the way of suffering, is walking with Christ in the way of Christ. That even in the face of death you have a faithful God. Of whom the psalmist says, "If I ascend to heaven, behold! You! And if I make my bed in sheol—that is, in the grave—behold! You!" (Ps 139.8).

It's God's promise that His Word connected to water attaches you to the death and resurrection of Jesus in such a profound way that Christ's death is yours and His resurrection yours, and it cleanses you from all your sins.

It's God's promise that His Word coming from the mouth of one of His pastors does what it says, though you can't see it or feel it: forgive your sins.

It's God's promise to you that at the Word of His beloved Son bread and wine are body and blood. There. For you. And that by eating and drinking them in faith you have not only the forgiveness of sins, but life and salvation. Now. Even when you can't see it.

That's what a promise is.

But walk away from this parable with anything else, and you've missed the point. And misunderstood how God works in His kingdom.

Just like the workers from the start of the day.

The master had made an entirely free choice about what he wanted to give the workers. And it was good. It was a fair day's wage. And then he had made a perfectly free choice about to whom he'd award

those contracts. And it was good. The entire impetus lay with the master. To hire or not to hire. Whom to hire. And what to pay. And whatever he promised those whom he hired was good. And a gift. And, faithful to every one of his promises to every single worker, he delivered. Each got their denarius. And it was good.

But that's not the character and nature of the master the grumbling workers see. In fact, they completely overlook the character of the master, with all his generous free choice and gracious gift-giving. Instead, they look at themselves.

Now look, this is really interesting. Remember, this whole parable is about the character of the kingdom of heaven, which is to say, it's about the character of God Himself in Christ. The first workers are peeved not because the master didn't bump their pay for the day and give them *more* than what he agreed to. They're peeved because those who worked less got the same. In other words, all they can see is the master's *injustice*; they can't see that what's from their perspective unjust is precisely the goodness and grace of the master. But that's how the Gospel always is. Against the canon of justice, it's pure heresy. The undeserving are rewarded; and God keeps His promises.

But look at the master's response: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong."

To judge the justice of the kingdom of heaven on entirely human terms is to miss the boat. Entirely. Don't do it! If the hymn, "Chief of sinners, though I be," sure, applies to you, but it applies to your wife or your neighbor more, repent! You're not sinning against your neighbor—you're sinning against God Himself. Because you've measured God and His grace and mercy by the wrong stick. We always say, "Let God be God. Don't put Him in a box." Well, here's what it means: Don't tell Him how to be merciful to others.

Because by the same measure you measure out, it will be measured out to you. If you measure God and His kingdom by your stick—by the stick of *your* justice—, you've lost the kingdom. In fact, you've never even seen it.

Because the master is, if nothing else, free and generous. Which is to say that God and His Gospel are, if nothing else, free and generous. The master owed no one a job that day. And yet he gave them all jobs. And the denarius to go with it. A good day's wage. Good. Compelled purely by grace and mercy. Just as God owes no one the forgiveness of sins. And yet He gives it. He gives it to you, who have allowed sin to gain the upper hand. He gives it to you, who were conceived in iniquity and born in sin. He gives it to you, who for your inborn didn't even know God.

And what explains that? His ROI? No. Nothing explains it. Except His pure grace and mercy and generosity.

And that pure grace and mercy and generosity has come to you *this very day*. The master has brought you here, into his vineyard. And here, He gives all of you the same: the forgiveness of sins, and life and salvation in Jesus name.

Amen.

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