



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 24, 2017

“Counting Other Peoples’ Blessings”

(Matthew 20:10-15)

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“Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous” (Matthew 20:10-15).

Collect: Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Call Day at the seminary is the day when fourth year seminarians receive their first call from a church to serve as pastor. The chapel is packed; emotions are high. Today there are very few surprises on Call Day; everyone pretty much knows where they will be going. But when I was graduating, none of us had a clue. It could have been anywhere. And there was no questioning the assignment; you went where you were sent.

Yes, the seminary interviewed us and asked us what our preferences were in terms of general part of the country and the type of parish work. But we had the sneaking suspicion the interviews didn't matter, that it was mostly random. We had seen many guys from classes before us sent in the opposite directions they had requested. Rumor also had it the District Presidents did some last-minute horse trading. ("George, I'll give you Schultz, Krentz, and Kreitzer, three of my best, if you agree to take on Groth.")

So there we sat in front of the chapel during the Call Day Service, our wives and families somewhere behind us, atlases in hand. Of course, we were anxious. Gail had her own specialized career going; what a different trajectory her career would have taken if I had been assigned to a remote part of North Dakota.

They called our names, one by one, told us the name of the church and where it was. We walked across the platform, shook hands, said thank you and in the other hand received a big manila envelope which had all the details . . . the size of the congregation, the challenges and opportunities, even the salary and benefits. Under no circumstances could we open that envelope, not until the service was over and we had all processed out of the chapel. Then we found our wives and tore into those envelopes.

Later, among friends we started comparing notes. Some of my classmates were assigned small and dying churches in the country with small and dying salaries. Others received calls, from large congregations with multiple pastors in affluent suburbs of beautiful cities, and hefty salaries by comparison. You can imagine, there were quiet flashes of envy among us. We tried to tamp down the envy, but it was there.

Envy is the most joyless of the transgressions. There's no pleasure in envy, not like there is in other vices. Envy promises only pain. Proverbs 14 says "A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot" (v. 30). Envy counts other peoples' blessings rather than your own. Frederick Buechner wrote, "Envy is the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are" (Wishful Thinking, p. 24).

But God is generous. Jesus said, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and lets rain fall on the just and the unjust." You can almost smell the envy in Ecclesiastes 9: "Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all" (v. 11). This too is meaningless, and maddening. And here's the rub: when we feel envious, it's like we're accusing God of being unjust. The Bible says he's just and his judgments are right, but we know better. We see people prospering who don't deserve it.

We all love it when God is generous to us. However, we also live in a country and a culture where we like to think we get what we deserve, what we work for. We get what we save for and pay for. We like to think that what we have we achieved by hard work and discipline. And we have trouble with people who get ahead of us if they don't deserve it or didn't earn it. "It's not fair!" we think.

Something very similar is happening in the parable. The owner of a vineyard goes to the town square where laborers gather everyday looking for work. This landowner

has a harvest of grapes that are ready. With grapes, timing is everything. He needs workers today, not the day after tomorrow. And he needs a lot of them. So at sunrise, 6:00 a.m. he is already in town hiring everyone in sight. But the harvest is large. The progress is slow. So he returns to the labor market at 9:00 a.m. and hires another group of workers. At noon and 3:00 p.m. he's back again. And at 5:00 p.m., not long before sunset, he hires a fifth group to help finish the job.

At quitting time (6:00 p.m.) the workers line up to be paid. The owner begins with the last group hired. To their absolute delight, they receive a full day's pay, even though they were in the vineyard for just a little while. He pays them in full view of everybody else. And so we know who else is delighted: the others who were out there much longer, from sunrise, through the blazing heat of midday. They're expecting a big, fat bonus. After all, they did most of the work. So, when their turn comes to be paid, they can hardly believe their eyes. They receive the same amount as those one hour workers, the full amount for a day's work, but not a penny more. They're not happy about it . . . not at all. "It's not fair!" they say. "You paid them as much as you paid us, but we did most of the work!" To which the owner responds, "Take what you have and go. . . Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?" Then the owner puts his finger on the real problem: "Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Who of us hasn't felt that envy? Who of us hasn't felt that resentment at work, when others are promoted when clearly, they didn't earn it? Who of us can't relate to the all-day laborers in the vineyard? But think about it. Their argument is with grace. They're grumbling about grace, about the owner's generosity. "They didn't earn it. Why did you give them what they didn't earn?"

By the way, Jesus told this story not to serve as a business plan, but to change our assumptions about God. Most of us grew up with the idea lurking somewhere that God is a bean counter, carefully keeping track of what we've

done or failed to do and rewarding or punishing us accordingly. But in this strange story, God is not keeping score. God's system is based on something other than performance, something other than good works, and it confronts and contradicts much of what we assume about God. This owner doesn't settle accounts based on what the workers did. He settles them on the basis of his generosity, his grace.

That's the way God works with us, too. "We are saved by grace . . . not by works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8). Luther wrote, "Grace is freely given to the most undeserving and unworthy and is not obtained by any strenuous efforts, endeavors, or works, either small or great, not even by the efforts of the best and most honorable men" (Plass, 603).

Many know that God is gracious, but they like to think God reserves his grace for those who are mostly good. It makes up the difference for their minor load of iniquities. But some also think the lives they have lived have disqualified them from grace. Luther rejects such speculation. He writes, "I do indeed believe that [Jesus, the Lamb of God] took away the sins of St. Peter, St. Paul, and other saints; they were pious people. But do you not hear what John says? 'This is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world?' Surely, you cannot deny that you are a part of the world of human beings; for you were born of a man and a woman, you are not a cow or a hog. In consequence, your sins must certainly be included (in Christ's burden) as well as those of St. Peter or St. Paul . . . Therefore, do not follow your own ideas, but cling to the Word that promises you forgiveness of sins through the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world Do you hear? There is no insufficiency in the Lamb. It bears all sins from the very beginning of the world. Therefore, it must bear yours too, and offer you grace" (Plass, p. 608).

This grace is offered to all, so whose fault is it if some are lost? Again, from Luther: "If a wealthy man wanted to satisfy the needs of all the beggars in a city but

some did not want to go to him and receive money from him, whose fault would it be that these beggars remain beggars and do not also become rich? In reality, it would not be the fault of the wealthy man but their own fault. Their continued poverty would be due to the fact that they are such lazy knaves (Plass, 609). Elsewhere he adds, “But to convince people they are poor and need grace is a great art. The task is achieved with difficulty. Then, too, the devil will not put up with it. On the contrary, he is forever attracting people to good works in order to make sure that they do not get to the point of thinking that they need the grace and mercy of Christ” (Plass, 612).

Conversely, how good it is to live this life knowing God has already reconciled us to himself through Christ. George Frederick Handel, the composer of the Messiah and many other works was a German Lutheran. He wrote, “What a wonderful thing it is to be sure of one’s faith! How wonderful to be a member of the Lutheran church, which preaches the free grace of God through Christ as the hope of sinners! If we were to rely on our works, what would become of us?” (Plass, 612).

Hear this parable as good news then, whether you’ve been working in the vineyard since sunrise, or just got started, for at the end of the day God gives us gifts, not wages. And when he gives gifts, he holds nothing back. He fills our cups to the brim.

One last thing: this vineyard owner in the parable, who pays the last worker full wages . . . doesn’t he sound a lot like the man whose hospitality reached out to include those society routinely spurned: the sinners and tax collectors, the demon-possessed, the children, the Gentiles? Doesn’t this owner sound like the one who went to the cross out of love for the entire world, not just for part of it? And doesn’t he sound like the one who said, “Drink of it all of you, for the forgiveness of sins”? Therefore, don’t count other peoples’ blessings. There’s no joy found there. Count your own, and return to him with thanks and praise. Amen.

