

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 20, 2020

Psalm 27:1–9

1 The LORD is my light and my salvation;

whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;

of whom shall I be afraid?

2 When evildoers assail me

to eat up my flesh,

my adversaries and foes,

it is they who stumble and fall.

3 Though an army encamp against me,

my heart shall not fear;

though war arise against me,

yet I will be confident.

4 One thing have I asked of the LORD,

that will I seek after:

that I may dwell in the house of the LORD

all the days of my life,

to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD

and to inquire in his temple.

5 For he will hide me in his shelter

in the day of trouble;

he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;

he will lift me high upon a rock.

6 And now my head shall be lifted up

above my enemies all around me,

and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!

8 You have said, "Seek my face."

My heart says to you,
"Your face, LORD, do I seek."

9 Hide not your face from me.
Turn not your servant away in anger,
O you who have been my help.
Cast me not off; forsake me not,
O God of my salvation!

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 55:6–9

6 "Seek the LORD while he may be found;

call upon him while he is near;

7 let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;

let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

EPISTLE: Philippians 1:12–14, Philippians 1:19–30

The Advance of the Gospel

12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard

and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, 20 as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. 29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

THE GOSPEL Matthew 20:1–16

Laborers in the Vineyard

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. **2** After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. **3** And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, **4** and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ **5** So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. **6** And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ **7** They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ **8** And when evening came, the

owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' **9** And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. **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.' **13** But he replied to one of them, '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. **15** Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' **16** So the last will be first, and the first last."

Sermon 36 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 20:1-16

Dear friends,

Our Gospel lesson is part of a continuity, which normally means I give you a ton of backstory that may or may not matter. I'm not going to do that this time, because as much as this has to do with the other things Matthew records around it, it is its own parable and it has its own message. The essence of the parable is pretty simple: Who is justified and why? While straightforward to actually preach, internalizing this, learning it in the heart, is far from simple. God does things that seem unjustified to us. They are not. This is hardly a surprise for you Christians, God is God after all, but how we see this is difficult. It just doesn't make much common sense to us.

The lead-up to this was found last week. The disciples, to our startlement, have been arguing amongst themselves about who is the greatest. This seems incredibly immature of the disciples, we generally expect better from the men who will found our

church and die to do it, but they are human and full of sin and too concerned about hierarchy and greatness. Jesus has presented them with another parable, the parable of the ungrateful servant who was forgiven much and refused to forgive the small debt owed him, and Jesus has also presented them with a little child and told them that this child is their example. That if they want to be great, they should be as needy and dependent on God as a little child. So the question of the room, the question that's hovering around that Jesus is trying to deal with, is what is greatness. What is our due, what have we earned, how are we to stand out? Are we to stand out? These kinds of things.

So Jesus tells this parable. **“1For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’”** So far, so good. Day labor is a very old tradition, and this house master is making use of it. A denarius is a day's wages so the payment is fair. The words used here give you a clue that more is going on here than basic Middle-eastern economics, though. Jesus repeatedly uses the word “just.” For example, in verse 4 the master tells those he hires that he will give them what is justified. I don't think that's a coincidence, it plays into how he talks later, and into the themes of this section of the Bible in particular.

In economic terms, work is worth a certain amount. The market is theoretically supposed to decide the worth of each kind of work. If you get paid according to the worth of your work, that pay and that work is justified, its fair, and its righteous. Jesus is using this as an illustration of both His own work and that of His church, specifically, His disciples and preachers and so on. The church has done work throughout all the ages of human history. We have preached and shown mercy in good times and bad, good places and bad, in season and out of season as our Lord commands.

The burdens of each are different. Being Christian in America today is different than being a Christian when you were younger. Being a Christian in Europe is different than America, again for the Middle East, again for Africa. It's all different. I know you folks know this, so why am I saying it? Jesus is telling you that the work is the same, and the wage is the same, and that wage is right. More specifically, that wage is righteousness. We work, and at the end of the day, that is, at the end of our lives or the world or whatever, we receive our wage: Our just wage, our righteous wage, which is righteousness itself. So we work, at the end of the day, we are righteous.

But that isn't it. I'm not just talking about how righteousness is Christ's work, you all know that, I don't have to re-plow that ground. Jesus makes us righteous and we work in His name, and that's we're all doing here. I'm talking about how this doesn't make any sense. All these situations are different, America, Africa, East Coast and West Coast. Yet the reward is the same, because the work is the same. But it doesn't seem like it should

be. Being a Christian in Africa is hard, same with wherever else. Being a Christian in America is hard in weird ways, but not in the same ways. Yet we receive the same righteousness. Put simply, it hardly seems fair.

“6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ 8 And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ 9 And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. 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.’”

Again, in human terms this is entirely fair enough, and it even makes Jesus look like a spooky megacorporation sticking to the contract and nothing else. They agreed to a denarius for a day's work, that's plain. But our human understanding of fairness doesn't square with it. The market supposedly rewards hard work, at least that's what I was told. The guys who worked all day get more, especially through the heat of the day, which is not inconsiderable in that part of the world. But this is what they agreed to.

We all do church, and we all do our Christianity, where God places us. At the end of our doing, we receive eternal life, because Jesus has suffered and died on the cross for all men in all situations and so on. Most of you I would guess are Christian enough just to be able to appreciate that, if so good on you, but what do you do when God doesn't seem fair? Because that happens often enough. It happens in troubles, like some people just get hit with way too much and some people get hit not at all. It happens with life situations, and it even happens with the church. Being church in some nice area is not the same as being a church in the middle of nowhere, or a church in a hostile culture. It doesn't work out evenly, but the end result is even across the board, salvation for all.

“13 But he replied to one of them, ‘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. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ 16 So the last will be first, and the first last.” This is Commie talk if I've ever heard it. Everyone gets the same across the board. That's not how life works, you and I know it, but Jesus highlights the important point at the end. The ESV doesn't translate verse 15 well, the master's final question reads like this: Do you think my goodness evil? Do you think that I'm being evil by my generosity? And that gets to the heart of what Jesus is talking about.

He's not talking about economics, he's talking about mutual need. Our sin is our first need, and we forget that at our peril. It's easy to, with health problems, national

crises, and all this other stuff that ends up going wrong, but at the end of the day we are just workers in the field. At the end of the day, what Jesus gives us is justification for our sins. He gives us what is right, and what is right is not what we deserve, but what His generosity decides to give us, which is His righteousness. It's not wordplay for wordplay's sake, it Jesus taking His disciples down from their fixation on their understanding of right and wrong. Jesus is generous with His forgiveness, and we like that, but when things get unequal we tend to bristle. Jesus reminds us that we shouldn't. We all need the same thing. We need to be redeemed from the judgments we make about God's fairness, about our estimations of what God should or should not be doing. That's idolatry, and it comes so naturally its hard to remember we're even doing it. God is God, we all know that, but God being God means that this ends up crashing hard into what we think is needed or necessary for a given situation. It ain't fair, it's God, and that's good, because if God were fair, we'd all be done for.

Back to that first question. Who is right? When we look at our lives, and we see how it doesn't all work out, are we wrong? Yeah, we are. God doesn't promise to square the deal. He promises instead to give us what is right, and He'll do that. God will give you what is right, and what that means is that, in the end, God will redeem you to live with Him in eternity. This world won't look like it, it never does, and that's genuinely hard to swallow when you've been served a hefty dollop of something, but this world isn't the point.

G Amen

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