

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)  
St. Matthew 20:1-16

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

At the end of Matthew 19, Jesus said to His disciples,

Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. (Matthew 19:28-30)

Then, chapter 20, today's text, starts.

Preaching on today's Gospel, Luther wrote,

Therefore we must not consider this parable in every detail, but confine ourselves to the leading thought, that which Christ designs to teach by it. We should not consider what the penny or shilling means, not what the first or the last hour signifies; but what the householder had in mind and what he aims to teach, how he desires to have his goodness esteemed higher than all human works and merit, yea, that his mercy alone must have all the praise...

What Luther is getting at is precisely what I hope to get across in the sermon today.

After all, many can and do debate about the different hours. As Luther put it, some say that the hours represent different ages in the history of mankind. Some might say that they are meant to show the different stages in the life of a man when he might come to faith, either in the first hour, such as from birth, to the eleventh hour, such as on his deathbed. And I'm sure there are other possible explanations as to what the hours might mean.

These explanations all work to one extent or another, to one degree or another, and they are all worthy and necessary discussion which help to flesh out the meaning of this text. But to focus on the different hours solely misses the point that Jesus is making by introducing you to workers who are hired at different hours of the day—and more importantly, by introducing you to the master of the vineyard.

The workers are hired to work in the master's vineyard. The master has expectations of them—they are to work the vineyard, be that tending to the vines, picking the grapes, making the wine, or any number of other tasks that may need to be done in a vineyard. The master has agreed with them for a day's wage. When the master goes out to hire more workers, the agreement is the same, though not explicitly stated in the parable. He will pay them whatever is right.

This, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Therefore, you, dear hearers, have been hired by the Master to work in His vineyard—you are baptized and made a part of the Kingdom of God, and you have a place in the Church Militant. Each of you, according to the gifts you have been given, have been given tasks in this vineyard, be it tending to the vines, picking the grapes, making the wine, or what have you—however these tasks may translate to your given vocations. You likely know your gifts; you certainly know your vocations—and in both cases, you definitely have issues and problems and disagreements and general malcontent.

When the end of the day comes, the master pays his workers. Each of them receives a day's wage, no matter when they were hired.

Likewise, when it comes to the end of this age, you will each receive your wage, no matter what age of mankind you were in when you came to faith or what stage in your earthly life you came to faith. You are one whom the Master has chosen—you are His elect—and your wage is salvation procured for you by His Son on the cross. If the wages of sin is death (cf. Romans 6:23), then the wages of forgiveness of sins is eternal life; this is what the Master deigns to give you as one that He has forgiven for all of your sins. As Jesus said, all who for His name's sake leave everything—that is, those who are called by His name—“will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.”

That is what your election is. When you were hired by the Master—when you were claimed by Him in the waters of Holy Baptism—you were forgiven for your sins, and you continue to be so. The agreed upon wage there at the font was eternal life and salvation. You are paid what is right—what is righteous or your righteousness: the blood of Jesus shed for you as the propitiation of your sins and the seal of eternal life.

Here's the kicker, though: the wage is the same for first-hour Christians as it is for eleventh-hour Christians. The duration of work, amount of work, difficulty of work make no impact on this wage. Why? Because you didn't earn it. Jesus did! Jesus earned the wage of life and salvation by His own righteousness, which He gives to you as your righteousness and forgiveness of sins. The trick is to move away from the thinking that those who work more or more arduously somehow have earned more life and salvation—a preposterous idea, if you really give it any thought, and it's an idea contrary to the Word of God. The work God gives you to do does not earn you an increase of His favor, as regards forgiveness, life, and salvation. These He gives you freely as His elect—His chosen workers.

Now, I could go into the degrees of glory, which do relate to duration, difficulty, or amount of work. I could speak about how to the one whom much is given, much is expected, as in the parable of the talents (cf. Matthew 25:14-30), or how the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, how the one who sows bountifully will reap bountifully, as St. Paul wrote. (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:6) It was Dr. Francis Pieper who wrote,

There are no degrees of bliss, because all the blessed are perfectly happy, that is, every one of them will find full contentment for himself in beholding God. However, Scripture does teach that there are degrees of glory corresponding to differences of work and fidelity here on earth... Self-evidently degrees of glory in heaven will not call forth envy, but only praise of God, because sin has been completely eliminated. (*Christian Dogmatics*, Volume III, pages 552, 553)

As an image of this bliss without degrees, I have seen it said that when the apostle Paul entered eternity, he did so to the cheers of those he martyred, even though, as he wrote, he called himself the chief of sinners. (1 Timothy 1:15) I like to joke that he and John the Baptist, whom Jesus called lower than least in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 11:11), have to duke it out for the lowest seat at the heavenly banquet, a topic which suggests the degrees of glory. Such discussions, however, are really quite immaterial to the text at hand. The text at hand deals with the wage given to the workers, which relates to eternal life, the one and only degree of bliss.

For today's text, with regard to the degrees of work and degrees of glory, it is enough to say that there is work to be done, and God has entrusted you with that work. He has agreed—indeed, already granted to you—the wages of life and salvation; guaranteed them to you for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ, who by His perfectly obedient life, by His death and resurrection, even by His ascension and continued intercession for you, has earned for you these things, because for His sake, you are forgiven for all of your sins. This is the goodness of God the Master that is to be esteemed higher than all human works and merit, the mercy of God that alone must have all the praise!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.