

## 2.16.2025 Septuagesima (Matthew 20:1-16)

We began our service today by singing a song of the saints of God. This hymn describes the saints just as we so often picture them, “patient and brave and true,” those “who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew. And one was a doctor (St. Luke)... one was a queen (St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland)... one was a shepherdess on the green (St. Joan of Arc)... one was a soldier (Martin of Tours)... one was a priest (John Donne)... and one was slain by a fierce wild beast (Ignatius of Antioch) who, after refusing to renounce his faith, was thrown to the lions for the entertainment of the Roman crowds at the Colosseum, and as he marched toward his martyrdom, Ignatius wrote to the Church, saying, “...nearness to the sword is nearness to God; to be among the wild beasts is to be in the arms of God; only let it be in the name of Jesus Christ. I endure all things that I may suffer together with Him, since He who became perfect man strengthens me.”

Spoken like a true saint, a saint of God, and we can picture them all. They’re the heroes of our faith, and another hero, St. Paul, the inspired human author of the Epistle lesson today describes a saint in a similar way. Using the familiar image of a foot race, Paul writes, “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it*” (1 Corinthians 9:24). These words bring to mind the strict, disciplined way of the victorious runner. Those who run to win, Paul tells us, bring their body “*into subjection,*” or as another translation reads, “*I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should*” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Saints, like athletes in a great race, deny themselves many pleasures and endure much pain, because the Christian life is not one of ease and self-indulgence. Jesus made that clear when He said, “*Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me*” (Matthew 16:24). Like athletes, this one thing saints do, *forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, we press on toward the goal to win the prize*, and the prize is not a medal or a wreath. The prize is life eternal. The prize is “*God’s heavenly calling in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 3:13-14).

When we sing about the saints of God, or bring images of them to mind, we often picture saints in this way, as the “patient and brave and true,” those

who've "*fought the good fight... finished the race... kept the faith*" (2 Timothy 4:7), and yet, this imagery could lead us to picture a saint as one who is somehow storming their way into heaven by their own good works, but thanks be to God, the Gospel passage we read today contains a parable that corrects that type of erroneous thinking. This parable, which Jesus said is a description of what "*the kingdom of heaven is like*" was told in response to a bold question asked by St. Peter. Peter said to our Lord, "*We have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?*" (Matthew 19:27). Peter wanted to know how the saints who've given up everything, who've left all to follow Jesus, would be rewarded.

Jesus answered that question by telling a story about the Master of a vineyard, God, who paid all His workers the same wage despite the fact that some were called at the beginning of the day, while others were called at the third, sixth, ninth, and even the eleventh hour. This story describes a scene in which some workers, some saints, toil all day in the sun, while others work only one hour, yet they all receive the same equal reward for responding to the Master's call to come and work in His vineyard.

According to our Savior Christ, this is what *the kingdom of heaven is like*, and the picture He paints of the last being made equal to the first doesn't feel good to our worldly flesh. Many of us will hear this story and sympathize, or perhaps even feel inclined to agree, with the workers who murmured against the generosity of the Master. Those who said, "*These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day*" (Matthew 20:12). In this fallen world, we can be tempted to think in the same way, to tell ourselves that the saints are those who, to use the words of the hymn, have "followed the right, for Jesus' sake, the whole of their good lives long," and yet when we think of the saints in that way only, we can begin to consider the first as more deserving of God's favor, and the last as those who have done far too little to be worthy of receiving such grace.

To those who think that way, the Master says, "*Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I*

*am good?*” (Matthew 20:13-15). What we’re taught here is the truth that if God chooses to give extraordinary grace to some, it’s simply a great kindness to them, and no injustice at all to those who’ve toiled all day in the sun. Instead of being proud of their own work, or envious of gifts given to others, those saints who are called early into the vineyard should praise God for His grace and mercy in calling them at that hour, for they were given much time in this life to store up for themselves *“treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal”* (Matthew 6:20).

In this parable our Lord teaches us that eternal life is a gift given equally to all who call upon His name (Romans 10:13). Whether first or last, all who respond to God’s gracious invitation to come and work in His vineyard will receive the gift of heaven, and perhaps the best example of that being true for those who are called last is found on Good Friday. Holy Scripture describes the day our Lord was crucified, telling us that those who passed by Jesus reviled Him, the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked Him, and that one of the two criminals crucified beside Jesus also mocked and derided our Savior, but in the midst of this horrific scene, the criminal who hung on the other side of our Lord heard the gracious call of God to go into His vineyard.

In the context of the parable, this criminal would be one who had been standing idle in the marketplace all day, but at the eleventh hour, just moments before his death, he heard the Master’s voice, saying, *“Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive”* (Matthew 20:7). This criminal heard the call, turned to Jesus and said, *“Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom”* (Luke 23:42), and one who was called last was made equal to the first. A criminal, who never toiled or fought or lived or died for the Lord, by the grace and mercy of Almighty God became a saint canonized by Jesus Himself, who said, *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise”* (Luke 23:43).

The parable we read this morning teaches us that the saints of God are not only the heroes of our faith who’ve “followed the right, for Jesus’ sake, the whole of their good lives long,” but that saints are called at every hour of this life to come and work in the vineyard. Some will “toil and fight and live and

die” bearing *the burden and the heat of the day*, while others will work only one hour, but those called last will be as welcome in kingdom of heaven as those who’ve labored all day, because nobody earns union with God in His kingdom based on the number of hours they’ve worked in the vineyard. Salvation is a free gift of grace given equally to all who respond to the Master’s call, a gift that is His alone to give because it was God’s only Son, our Lord, who came into the world and purchased that gift by His precious Blood shed on the Cross at Calvary.

So, while there’s time, by the grace and mercy of God, may we who have heard His call, with thankful hearts run the race St. Paul describes. In humility, and in loving gratitude, may we press on toward the goal, knowing that we can’t earn this prize by our own effort, but that we can run. Running the race is not about earning the prize. Running the race is about union with God. Running to Him. Responding to His love. May you and I respond in humility and obedience to the love the Father has lavished on us, and may we all be instruments that God uses to call others to Himself at every hour of the day, to the end that heaven may be filled with saints, and God glorified.