

2.17.2019 Septuagesima (Matthew 20:1-16)

After donating 30 billion dollars to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Warren Buffet said, “There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way.” The world in which we live would agree with his words. We live in a world that constantly measures the value of every human being by the work we do. In school, good students receive good grades based on the work they do. At work, employees put in long hours in order to receive a paycheck that is based the work they do. At home, many parents give their young children a small allowance, and their older, more responsible children a larger allowance, based on the amount of work they do. Even at church, among Christians who have seen the Son of God nailed to a Cross as a testimony of “... *the breadth, and length, and depth, and height*” of a love we could never earn (Ephesians 3:18), even we battle the desire to merit God’s love and the hope of heaven based on our own good works.

It wasn’t meant to be like this, in the beginning God created human beings, but since the Fall of Man, in a futile attempt to redeem ourselves, we’ve turned into a bunch of “human doings.” We center our lives around earning a grade or working hard for a paycheck, and from day one our life experience leads us to believe that better grades and better paychecks are given to better people. The world, like Warren Buffet, would have us believe that our value, here and in heaven, is based on our performance, that those who do the most and earn the most are worth the most, both to man and to God. That’s what this world is like, but have you ever wondered what the kingdom of heaven is like? In our Gospel lesson this morning, our Lord speaks to us about His kingdom, saying that “*The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard*” (Matthew 20:1).

Our Gospel lesson today is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, and in this parable Jesus paints a beautiful picture of God as a landowner, one who owns a vineyard and all it produces. As the owner, it is God who hires laborers into His vineyard. He hires as many as He wants, whenever He wants, and any payment received comes from His gracious hand.

In the story we are told that the first group of laborers agreed to receive a penny a day, and went to work in the vineyard at sunrise. Then, at about the

third hour (around 9:00 am), the owner hired another group of laborers, but these laborers were not hired for a penny a day, instead the gracious owner of the vineyard simply stated: *“Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you”* (Matthew 20:4). At noon and at 3:00 the owner hired even more laborers under the same agreement (*“whatsoever is right I will give you”*). Finally, at 5:00, with only one hour to work before the end of the day’s harvest, we are told that the owner of the vineyard *“went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive”* (Matthew 20:6-7).

Up to this point, the story is all routine. It’s the time of the harvest, and the owner of the vineyard is in a race against the clock as he tries to gather his crop before anything is lost. This harvest is so great that the owner needs all the laborers he can hire, and so, even at 5:00 that evening, he hires more laborers and sends them into his vineyard. Those hired that evening had spent the day searching for work and found none, but now, finally, just before sunset, they hear the voice of the gracious owner of the vineyard, calling them to work in his field.

You and I, as people who work hard for our money, and who live in a world that measures the value of a person by their performance, we can imagine that those hired at the last hour didn’t expect to receive much compensation. After all, they had only worked for an hour. How valuable would you consider an employee who only worked for one hour of a twelve hour workday? If you owned the vineyard and were signing the paychecks, how much would they be worth? Consider Warren Buffet, how much value do you think he would place in a common laborer who worked for one hour? Certainly not much, that’s just what this world is like, but the gracious owner of the vineyard, God Almighty, offers insight into what the kingdom of heaven is like when He speaks these words to all who go to work in His field: *“Whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive”* (Matthew 20:7).

These words stand as the unexpected plot twist in this parable. This routine story turns upside down when we learn that those hired at the last hour of the day received the same wage as those who were hired at sunrise. In a world that places the highest value on those who do the most and earn the most, an

equal, graceful gift is not only uncommon, it's often unwelcome. The thought that such grace could be unwelcome sounds absurd, but proof of that sad truth is found in the angry reaction of those who labored in the vineyard all day. Remember, these workers received exactly what the owner said he would give them at the beginning of the day, but after seeing what the other workers were paid, they no longer felt the amount they agreed to was enough. Their gratitude for the opportunity to work and to receive a day's wage quickly disappeared, and they said to the gracious owner of the vineyard, *"These last men have worked but one hour, and you have made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden and heat of the day"* (Matthew 20:12).

This parable is two thousand years old, but the way it reveals the human heart is as true today as it was then. This group of disgruntled workers grumbled and complained that this wasn't fair, and wouldn't most people in our society agree? In this world, we can get so wrapped up in working and earning and feeling so deserving of all we receive that we are left unable to rejoice in grace; grace that cannot be earned, grace that is completely undeserved, amazing grace that we cannot reach out and get, but can only be given. Instead of rejoicing in grace given so generously to the unworthy, we view this equal reward for unequal labor as just one more example of how life isn't fair, and in a way we're right, life isn't fair.

If life were fair, we'd all get exactly what we deserve, and you can be certain of this truth: We don't get what we deserve. The Cross, and our Lord on it, stands as evidence of that truth. Almighty God, the gracious owner of the vineyard, through the precious death and sacrifice of His Son, speaks to all who labor in His fields of grace and says, *"Whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive."* This is what the kingdom of heaven, and the gift of eternal life is like. It is God demonstrating His love for us, in that, *"while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8). While we were yet sinners. In other words, when we could not be more unworthy and undeserving of His love, God sent His Son to die for all who labor in His vineyard, from the first to the last. God shows no favoritism in dealing with His people (Acts 10:34).

The Cross will always be a stumbling block to people who think they can earn God's favor, His love, and the hope of heaven based on their own good works, because to look at the Cross is to be reminded of a debt we could never pay, a gift we do not deserve, a love we could never earn. None of us

are worthy. None of us deserve the gift of eternal life. Thirty billion dollars doesn't buy one day in heaven. Eternal life is a gift freely given through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23), and our deep, heartfelt gratitude for His sacrificial gift of life and love is the Christian's motivation to labor with all our might in God's vineyard. Therefore, let us work, not so we will be rewarded, but because in Christ, we already are. Let us live righteously, not to become better people, but because through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we already are. And let us love, not to earn His love in return, but because by God Almighty, we already are.