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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, May 22, 2024
Matthew 20:1-16

HOLY GOSPEL..... Matthew 20:1-16, RSV
Last week we read about the Rich Young Man. Now we read about the Laborers in the Vineyard.

Before the Gospel:

☐ The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the Twentieth Chapter:

☑ **Glory to you, O Lord.**

[Jesus said to his disciples] ¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. ⁵Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This parable teaches us two important spiritual points. First, it encourages even people who are elderly to turn to Christ and become his disciples. The fact that the years have flown by and the end draws near should not hold them back, as if there is no point in turning to Christ at this late date. Jesus would have them

know that heaven lies ahead for them if they are willing. It awaits them, as much as the lifelong saint of the church. The householder orders that *all* the workers in the vineyard are to receive the denarius. That is what a working person needs to survive — a denarius. So, the one who turns to Christ in old age will receive what he needs in eternity, same as the seasoned saint of the Church. Today, then, is the perfect day to turn to Jesus, whether we are young or old.

The second important spiritual point in this parable is that the seasoned saint of the church should not be envious of the latecomer. This is the point with which I want to linger in this sermon. Do not begrudge the one who is late in coming to Christ. Do not protest that the late one should not get to dwell in the same heaven as the lifelong saint. Rather, rejoice for that latecomer.

So, let's compare the workers in the vineyard in this evening's parable with the two brothers in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). The one son is a rascal. He asks for his inheritance before his father has even died. How does he know that his father might not need that money? Life is uncertain. But the possibility of circumstances changing and the father needing the money does not seem to occur to the younger son. So, the young man gets the money. But he handles it in an awful way. The Bible says that he gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. His brother accuses him of living with harlots, and no one seems to deny that. And if the younger son had not squandered his possessions in riotous living, still it might well have been a heartbreak for his old father that the young man left in the first place. Who could have blamed the old man for looking at his younger son leaving the homestead and sighing to himself, "Go slow as you go through the gate. Let me keep my eyes on you as long as I can." But the young man seems to be off, without even a backward glance at his father.

You know how the story goes. The young man falls on hard times and resolves to go home. His father sees him, even at a distance, as if the old man has been scanning the horizon hoping and praying for his son to come home. And when he sees the lad, he runs to him. Old men sometimes have trouble running, but not this old man. He runs to his son, embraces him, kisses him, and calls for a celebration:

...let us eat and make merry [says the father]; ²⁴for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'
And they began to make merry. (Luke 15:23-24, RSV)

Now the story becomes akin to the daylong workers in the vineyard. It is a story of resentment. They resent the latecomers. It just does not seem right to them that those who labored but one hour should receive the same wages as those who have worked all day. Likewise in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the older son

resents all this merrymaking for his younger, wayward brother. He refuses to even refer to him as “my brother.” He calls him “this son of yours”:

²⁹but he answered his father, “Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!” (Luke 15:29-30, RSV)

And so it is that the older son is outraged at the grace shown to his young brother. Likewise, the daylong workers are outraged at the grace shown to the late workers.

But let’s have some compassion on both the Prodigal Son and on the latecomers. First, the wayward son.

While that young man was wandering, his life was not all that good. He had friends in that far-off land, but they were fair-weather friends. As long as he had money, they were there for him. But when he was broke, they gave him nothing. He had to eat the husks of corn, like the pigs.

Furthermore, even when his money was holding out, he was not doing so well. For one thing, his conscience should have been troubled to be living with harlots. He should leave those women in peace. He should leave them be. But he drags both himself and them down through his loose living.

Also, here he was a grown man, but with no job. Shame on him! He was not lending a hand to making this world better through his labors. He was not supporting himself or other people. He was simply squandering the wealth accumulated through the labors of others. That’s no way to live. The father seems to understand that the life of his younger son has improved when he left behind his riotous living and came home. We could wish that the older son had had some similar grace toward his younger brother.

Likewise with the late coming workers in the vineyard. At the end of the day, all the workers received a denarius. That is not a lot of money, but it is enough to keep body and soul attached to one another. If the latecomers had not been hired during that eleventh hour, they would not have had what they needed that day. Perhaps in the morning, they had promised the wife that they would earn some money that day and stop by the grocery store on the way home. But no one hired them. They lived with anxiety all the day long.

“Why do you stand here idle all day?” [the householder asked the workers near the end of the day] ⁷They said to

him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too."

So, they went into the vineyard and worked for the little time left. They received their denarius, stopped by the grocery store on the way home, and came home with a happy heart. Like the older son in the parable, the early workers begrudge the good fortune of the latecomers, but Jesus would not have us do that. Do not begrudge those who are late in coming to Christ, but rather rejoice for them.

After all, no one is perfect — neither the self-righteous son in the parable nor the day-long workers. If any of us are going to make it into heaven, it is because we receive some help and some grace. And indeed we do. We receive help and grace from Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.