

Matthew 20:1–16
Septuagesima
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
February 5, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today begins a new season of the church year, the season of pre-Lent. In about 70 days we will be celebrating Easter. That's why today is called Septuagesima Sunday. "Septuagesima" is Latin for 70th, as in the 70th day before Easter. Next Sunday is Sexagesima, about 60 days before Easter, and then Quinquagesima, about 50 days before Easter. Then comes Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the 40 day season of Lent leading up to Easter.

Lent is a time of repentance and a time of renewed Christian discipline, including fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. The season of Pre-Lent, which we begin today, these three weeks before Lent actually starts, gives you the opportunity to consider what your Lent will look like this year. What will you give up for Lent? What will you add to your daily schedule to grow in the faith? What days will you fast? Where will you give money and other resources to those who are in need? How might you consider improving your prayer life? We'll talk about these things in the next few weeks so you can be prepared when Lent arrives. In that way, the season of Pre-Lent is like a yellow traffic light telling us it's time to put on the brakes as we approach the season of Lent, when we will come to a stop and quietly reflect on our Savior's journey to the cross to die for our sins.

Our Gospel text for today, Septuagesima, is a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven, a picture of the Church, where we see how God's ways are different than the ways of man. With God, many who are considered first will be last and many who are considered last will be first.

The point here is that in the Kingdom of God we live by grace alone. None of us deserves to work in the Lord's vineyard and none of us can earn anything from God. It all belongs to Him already. We live and work for the Lord by grace alone, which is why we can't begrudge our Lord's generosity to others.

God calls workers into His Kingdom at different times in the world and in our lives. The first workers to go out into the vineyard agreed to work for a set amount of money—one denarius a day. In terms of world history, this could refer to the Jewish people. God gave the people of Israel the Law on Mount Sinai and said: "Do this and you shall live" (Lev 18:5; Luke 10:28). God also gave promises of the coming Savior, a Savior not only for Israel, but for all the nations of the world. God sent His workers out into the world at different times to bring people into His Kingdom. And then at Pentecost the Gentile nations were brought into the New Covenant and God again sent His workers out into all the nations of the world.

God has always been at work calling people from the idleness of this world into His vineyard, the church—from the futility of human knowledge to the wisdom of God revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Throughout history, we see the Gospel as a raincloud, moving from land to land. We see a remnant of God's people, the Church, scattered throughout all lands. Some languages and tribes and peoples were called from the idleness of the world to the Kingdom of God early on, some at midday, and some in these Last Days.

What we see played out in world history we also see occurring in our lives. Some of you were born into families that have been Christian for generation upon generation, as far back as you can trace. Many of you were baptized into the Christian faith as newborn babies. You were called into the Kingdom of God at the morning of your life, with the whole day ahead of you to work in the Lord's vineyard. Some of you came to Christ later in life, in the middle of the day.

You know all too well the misery and the darkness of this world's idleness. You lived in the passions of your flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind (Eph 2:3). But by grace God made you alive together with Christ! Those of you who came to the faith later in life have unique insight you can offer to lifelong Christians. You can warn us against being drawn back into the allurements of this sinful and idle world. And in turn, lifelong Christians can testify to the value of being brought up in a Christian home and family.

And never forget that God can call people into His vineyard at the 11th hour—at the end of the world or at the end of life. Some nations seem so opposed to Christ that they would never allow for the preaching of the Gospel. There are places in this world that appear to be lost causes to the Christian message. And some people spend their entire lives opposed to the Gospel, yet at the very end the Lord seemingly works a miracle. This is not encouragement to neglect Christian discipline. But we ought to recognize that in His grace, God will often work faith in the places and people we would expect the least.

Our Lord's parable of the laborers in the vineyard, however, is not just a picture of the different times people are called into God's Kingdom. This parable is also a kind of warning to not begrudge God's generosity, but to accept with thanksgiving everything our Lord graciously gives to us and to others. At the end of the parable, we get a picture of two kinds of workers: those who seek a reward, and those who work under grace. On the surface, both kinds of workers look the same. They were all in the vineyard working. You might not be able to tell right away who is working as a hired hand and who is working under grace.

But at the end, everything becomes clear. When evening came, the Lord of the Vineyard sent the supervisor, the foreman, to call the workers in and pay them their wages. Those called

last received the same amount promised to those who began working early in the morning. Talk about grace! As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 4: “to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, His faith is counted as righteousness.” Those called last hardly had any opportunity to work! They followed the master’s call, trusting that in His grace He would provide for them regardless of what they could accomplish. That’s faith in the goodness of our Lord. In the same way, we recognize we cannot live perfectly according to God’s Law. As a sinner, you are not able to accomplish all that which is given you to do. But the Lord is gracious. In the death of Jesus Christ your sins are atoned for and in His resurrection you are made righteous in the sight of God. You can’t work, so in grace the Lord gives to you what Jesus earned.

Those who were called first must have been delighted when they saw the Lord’s generosity! At least at first, thinking that if the Lord gives this much to those who don’t work, how much more will He give to those who have borne the burden of the day! But then those who were called first received exactly what they were working for. They were not working under grace but for a reward, for what they could get out of the bargain. In the end, the Lord’s generosity infuriates these workers, which shows the true state of their hearts. On the surface they seemed like diligent and faithful workers. But their reaction to the Lord’s grace betrays their true character. In the end, these workers get their reward and leave the vineyard. Those seeking an earthly reward receive their reward, and then they leave the Lord’s vineyard. But those working under grace stay in the vineyard to serve the Lord forever, receiving a heavenly reward. They are no longer servants of God, but sons of God (Gal 4:7).

As the season of Lent approaches, the Lord is calling you again to repentance and faith, to renewed service in His vineyard, and to a life of Christian discipline and good works. Maybe

you've been working in the Lord's vineyard most of your life, or maybe you were called not that long ago, but you've had periods of neglecting the things of God. Maybe you've taken on so much and can't seem to find the time to study God's Word or to pray in the busyness of your day to day life, or you've never thought about the Christian disciplines of fasting or intentionally giving to the poor. During Lent we'll consider all these things. Remember that the Lord of the Vineyard is gracious. In Christ, He forgives your past mistakes and opens your future to countless possibilities for service in His Kingdom. The Lord continues calling you to work in His vineyard, and He Himself gives you the grace and works in you to will and to work for His good pleasure. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.