

Sermon Notes September 24, 2023
Peace Lutheran Church
The Holy Gospel of Matthew 20: 1-16
“God’s Generosity?”

Jesus begins the parable with “the kingdom of heaven is like...,” reinforcing the guiding principle of his entire ministry - namely, the announcement that the kingdom of God is drawing near. Like the landowner who hires workers throughout the day, Jesus is determined to come back to the marketplace time after time, hour after hour, to gather up anyone who happens to be standing idly by. Ideas like marketplace and workers can provide a frame for understanding Matthew's telling of the Good News. This account seems intent on opening our eyes to the economy of God.

This parable, unique to Matthew, is like the story of Jonah, revealing the resentment that comes naturally when people perceive that they are being treated less fairly than others. Many sermons are geared toward explaining how God's justice appears to be unfair by the standards of merit or socially-assigned human worth. For this approach to lead to a hope-filled outcome, it is essential to help people see this episode in the context of Jesus' entire ministry, where one thing always leads to another, building like an investment gaining interest. Note that at this point in the story we are nearer to the end than the beginning, and the stakes seem to be getting higher.

A way to get at the Jonah-like resentment that most, if not all, listeners will have experienced at various times in their lives is to make it clear that Paul's encouragement to live one's life “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1: 27) is not about earning a payment that has yet to be received. In God's saving economy, payment is a pure gift rather than a reward. And the gift is not something that can be grasped and thereby possessed.

We must always remind the Body of Christ that the gift is not to be confused with our common understanding of payment, which is none other than God's own Son. Take full advantage of hearing the Good News of the Gospel and partaking of the sacrament of Holy Communion. In God's economy, everyone receives exactly the same. The same mercy. The same forgiveness. The same grace that Jesus embodies, tasted in bread and wine. Regardless of merit or perceived worth, Matthew's telling of the story leads to the Good News that everyone receives the very same Jesus Christ.

Much can be made of the last being first, and the first being last. It is less likely that this has to do with the order of payment, so much as it is about how the “first” are made to witness what all the others receive. Resentment as a response is out of bounds for those who pay attention to the story of the laborers in the vineyard, considering

where Jesus is headed when he tells it. Jesus' life is the announcement of the kingdom, and it is always unfolding in the direction of the cross.

The admonition to live a life worthy of such good news is all about opening this world's eyes to the wonder of the kingdom coming near. In Jesus, God takes hold of us like a parent who knows our jealousy and resentment, and who is determined to love us through all things, assuring us that in Christ, we all receive the same.