

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2023

Isaiah 55:6-9

Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30

Matthew 20:1-16

As Jesus was dying on the cross, bleeding for the sins of humanity, crushed beneath the weight of all lust and greed and pride and deceit and selfishness and idolatry and hate, one guy takes his eyes off of the astounding gift of grace transpiring in front of him, turns to the fellow next to him and says, “I served on the board of finance at my church for 26 years. What did *you* do?” As Jesus’ corpse was being tenderly carried by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to the garden tomb where it would lay dormant for parts of three days, one lady, walking behind in procession, turns to another and says, “I gave more than a tenth of my income to my struggling congregation for 34 years. How much did *you* give?” As word of Christ’s resurrection is spreading throughout the region like wildfire and disciples are harkening back to His teaching and reminding each other of all the things that Jesus had said alluding to His victory over death, one guy pauses and says to the chap closest to him, “have you done as much as me? I mowed my church’s lawn and sang in the choir for close to three decades.”

I’m so looking forward to seeing all y’all in heaven. We will look each other straight in the eye, we’ll laugh a rapturous laugh, and rejoice at all that we’ve been given. We’ll know how we got there. We’ll know the full extent of grace, the marvelous working of God’s Spirit through the Word and the Sacrament. We’ll know how forgiveness carried us in this life. We’ll know what love welcomed us unreservedly into God’s blessed kingdom, and we’ll luxuriate in the unity of heaven, the bond of camaraderie that is predicated on Christ alone. There’ll be no CEOs there. There’ll be no generals here, majors there, captains over yonder, and the enlisted, well... In heaven there’ll be no haves and have-nots, none greater and none lesser based on performance, on years of service, on any worldly variable. Heaven begins now. All are one in Christ now (Galatians 3:28).

Do y’all believe that there is such a thing as a superior Christian versus an ordinary Christian? I was in a situation where one wouldn’t think that they would hear theological nonsense and the big shot at the microphone said this: “Christians are those who go to heaven. Disciples change the world before they go.” If you ever hear anything like that in a public setting, I will give you a very crisp Benjamin Franklin if you say, loud as you can, “Booo!” Jesus tells a parable about grace that is supposed to knock your socks off. If you’re a union member, this parable may be contrary to everything that you hold dear. Grace; the Giver of Grace is insanely generous and you can’t hem Him in, you can’t program Him according to the world’s paradigms, you can’t stop Him from giving the greatest resource He has to offer to people who are the furthest thing away from deserving it.

The Master of the House hustles up workers who are sitting idle in the marketplace. He ventures back, over and over, to bring workers into His vineyard. Five times He goes there, during the 12 hour work-day, to recruit laborers into His vineyard. When it comes time to settle up, He pays the last to come into the vineyard first and they receive what one normally gets for working the whole day. The first ones are salivating at what they think is coming their way. Surprisingly, they receive the same wage, the wage that was agreed upon at the start of the day. “Hey, wait a

minute”, they say. This line is the kicker: “These last worked only one hour, and *you have made them equal to us* who have borne the heat of the day and the scorching heat” (Matthew 20:12). Measuring; are we stuck on measuring? How often do you see a janitor in his scrubs or a bag lady kneeling next to the King of England in Westminster Abbey? King and wash woman kneel at the same altar and receive the same body and blood that neither of them deserve but which both of them need. Is one going to receive more than the other? Is one going to receive less than the other?

Do you know where an envious or judgmental spirit comes from? Do you know who loves hierarchy and pretension and pushing one’s advantage? Satan loves that junk. The world is certainly full of it. Not in my kingdom, Jesus says. The last will be first and the first last. If you take your eyes off of Christ and His majesty and you emphasize the believer’s service to the Master as being the critical thing then you will fall into Satan’s trap. A crucified God levels the playing field. There is none greater, none lesser. We are all in this marvelous kingdom as a total gift. It’s simply remarkable that I’m in it. Remarkable! Even though I was an authentic dirtbag with nothing to commend me, a young lass who was already in the vineyard thought that the vineyard would be the perfect place for me and the other folks there, long in the vineyard, shook my hand and slapped me on the back. That congregation in 1986 loved God’s grace and therefore they loved me.

Is that spirit alive here at Christ the King? Dang straight! This is the local vineyard that the Lord God Almighty has called you into. All are alike here, welcomed by grace, treasured by our heavenly Father and eager to receive His gifts. We all know one thing, that it was the Lord Jesus and Him alone who bore the heat of the day. He kept the law perfectly in our place. He suffered the just punishment that our sins deserve and His righteousness is given to folks who have absolutely none of their own. Each of us has different gifts but we are one body. All comparisons between the workers in the vineyard are odious. We treasure the unity we have in Christ for it is heavenly, blood bought, a fruit of the tree of life. The Lord is continually going to the marketplace where humanity sits idle and He brings all kinds of folks into His vineyard. Isn’t that a joy to us! We look each other in the eye now, and laugh a happy laugh that His grace found us, found the one we laugh with, and we celebrate the forgiveness that carries us all. May it ever be so, to the glory of His holy name.