

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2026

Isaiah 55:6-9

Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30

Matthew 20:1-16

One of our sisters died this week – Charlene Holguin. She was a humble woman, devout, sincere, unpretentious. She worked as a nurse and a home health care provider. Charlene would not have scored 1600 on the S.A.T. I liked her. When she called me, she would say things like, “I hope that I’m not bothering you, Pastor.” “I’ll leave you to your business, Pastor.” “I don’t want to take too much of your time, Pastor.” Charlene suffered. She had a gynecological cancer that was resistant to treatment. She endured multiple (multiple!) scrapping surgeries. She had dark moments, to be sure. She begged God to take her. And yet she was brave. Charlene remained unmoved from Christ and His cross, Christ and His grace, Christ and His blood.

Charlene is whole now. Charlene is full of life, full of love, full of joy. Christ’s promises are realized for our sister. Heaven is her home. Pain is over; sorrow and guilt and shame and doubt and fear and feeling forgotten, feeling less-than is over. I am delighted for her. Now, what I’m about to say is a fiction, so don’t lag behind. Charlene arrives in heaven and looks about and thinks... how did *he* get in here? Charlene sees some people who she thinks didn’t quite measure up and a frowny face breaks over her mug as she thinks: “This place will take anyone.” Don’t they have an anteroom for some of these characters? Maybe I should be in the VIP lounge like when I go to LAX.

Jesus tells a parable that intended to blow the worldly chaff of artificial status out of His disciples’ souls. There’re a few things to keep in mind as we absorb our Lord’s teaching. They may sound overly simple to you, but the further you get away from these first principles the more in danger you are of being on the wrong side of this parable. God loves people. God loves His vineyard and bringing people into His vineyard is His jam. This is a parable of the kingdom of heaven. The vineyard was established by His Son dying on a cross. It was an astounding sacrifice. The Son of God came into a hostile environment. The Holy Messianic King endured the radical hatred of sinful man. Jesus body was torn by spikes as He was crucified, and God’s blood was spilled upon the earth that He created. All sin was located in Christ’s person and Jesus bore it to establish His vineyard – your lies, my pride, your greed and hate, my lust and selfishness. God the Father punished our sin in God the Son for the express purpose of establishing His vineyard. The church is Christ’s vineyard on earth. This blessed congregation is the gateway to the kingdom of heaven. What heaven is we are to be. God recruits sinners into His vineyard. All kinds of people, not just the ones that you prefer. God calls, God recruits, God beckons people over and over and over and over – He wants His vineyard full. And some come late.

God recruits babies and children, He calls and gathers teens into His vineyard, and young adults and middle agers and mature individuals and crusty old folks. God doesn’t tire of bringing people into His church, into His kingdom, into the vineyard, into heaven. He’s generous. Almighty God is insanely generous, wonderfully generous, joyfully generous. Hour after hour, our Father calls people that He loves, people that Christ died for, and they come. Some have wandered altogether too long in a lost state. Near the end of the day, they were empty on the

inside and they knew it – and God was there, calling them, calling them by His Word, calling them by the Gospel, calling them by Christ's very life coming to bear on them through the message of forgiveness. And they are only too happy to come into the vineyard. And they are loved. God loves them and blesses them and gives them a home. There are no caveats, no provisos to their entry – they are full in, all in, 100% in!

The question is, does that bug you? Does grace bug you? Does God's generosity bug you? Can you imagine being a Christian that is bugged by grace? How dark, and poor, and void it must be to be a Christian who is hostile to grace being extended to the undeserving. Why should we have missionaries if we are hostile to grace? Why should we preach the gospel at all if we are inimical to God saving people who don't deserve it? The church is moving through time, and it is collecting laborers in the vineyard as she plows forward. Young ones, old ones, haggard ones, fancy ones, droll ones, shy ones, gregarious ones – and the vineyard fills up. What holds us together? All of us disparate people, what holds us together? The Lord of the vineyard and His grace hold us together. The Lord of the vineyard and His goodness hold us together. The truth holds us together. The revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ holds us together. We are held together by the Holy Spirit, by the authority of God's Word, by the doctrine of the apostles. The vineyard is a happening place. The vineyard is light and life and hope and purpose and fellowship and sanctuary for sinners and communion with God.

And some don't like it. For whatever reason, the unbelieving world has a low regard for Christ's vineyard. And God still ventures to the marketplace to hire workers for the vineyard. He goes back and back and back and back and back. And when He delivers people to the vineyard, God expects them to be welcomed, embraced. Some folks don't like the look of the vineyard. For them, on the outside, it looks foreboding, exclusive, austere. Some folks look at the vineyard and think that it's oppressive, like some kind of prison, a cheerless institution of rules and chain-gangs and buzz kills. Billy Joel sang: "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints." That's how the unbelieving world sees the vineyard. The unbelieving world sees the vineyard as a place that they'd rather not work. So, they chase their impulses for ten house and ultimately find themselves empty on the inside. At the eleventh hour, God is delighted to call them and into the vineyard they come. Happily, they come.

And they receive the same grace, the same love, the same blood of the same crucified King as those who came into the vineyard at the beginning of the day. Are you blessed to be here? Are you deliriously happy that God called you into His church? Ultimately, do you know who hates grace? Satan. There's a book that Dr. Seuss wrote, called *The Sneetches*. Sneetches are a homogenous race, only some have stars on their bellies and others don't. Those with stars are pretentious and aloof and they look down on those without stars. Those without stars have bought into the program and feel bad about themselves and want to join the in-crowd. Along comes Sylvester McMonkey McBean who sells stars for the starless. Once the originally starred Sneetches are no long elite, they pay Sylvester McMonkey McBean to have their stars removed. And around and around it goes until everyone is penniless and Sylvester McMonkey McBean takes his cash and hits the road. Satan wants to drive a wedge into the vineyard so that grace is replaced with merit, replaced with artificial status, replaced with union principles of more wages (grace) going to the longest workers. Comparisons in the kingdom of heaven are noxious, the

product of an envious and evil spirit, calling into question God's grace, latently calling God unjust. Will we allow that here?

Who is it that bore the heat of the day? What "Worker" prepared the vineyard by spilling His blood? At the third hour the only true "Worker" in the vineyard was crucified. At the sixth hour, the Christ was in the midst of His labor to save you from sin and death. At the ninth hour, this divine Laborer cried out "It is Finished!" At the eleventh hour, the dead Messiah was placed into the tomb. That is the labor which is highlighted in this vineyard. To be sure, we work in this vineyard. We use the gifts that God has given us for the benefit of His kingdom. We love working together. The Lutheran who was here when Methuselah was born and the Johnny-Come-Lately Lutheran – we work together. None is before or after another. All are children of grace, children of the vineyard, children of the kingdom. Charlene is home. Christ feeds us the bread of life as we make our way home. It's beautiful to be in the vineyard. Someone new is coming soon. We will cheer their arrival. We'll shake their hand, slap their back, and welcome them with the same grace that we've received at Christ the King. That will be a happy day.