**The Work of Grace**

**Text: Matthew 20:14-16**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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I saw a bumper sticker once that said, “Caution: In case of Rapture, this car will have no driver.”

Whatever one thinks of the truth of biblical prophecy – whether you take it literally or metaphorically – it is quite arrogant to think that one has cracked the code and knows the precise day when the world will end, or Jesus will return, or the Great Tribulation will begin. Jesus himself didn’t know such things!

And, it is quite arrogant to assume that whenever that day does come, one will certainly be among the chosen who will be beamed out of the world. Arrogance is an ironic mindset for a follower of One who said, “Blessed are the *meek*, for *they* will inherit the earth” (Mt. 5:5).

The fact that we’re all here today, and that nothing happened yesterday in particular to indicate that the Great Tribulation has begun, indicates that yet another attempt to precisely date biblical prophecy has failed. But we ignore at our peril the prophetic insight that the pride of humanity and the judgment of God have put the world on a perilous course that could yet lead to a Judgment Day enveloped in a mushroom cloud.

Which brings us to today’s scripture, which may or may not be an allegorical reference to the Final Judgment, but it certainly is about the perils of pride.

Jesus, of course, did much of his teaching in parables; all of them either directly or indirectly about the Kingdom of God; or, as Matthew calls is, the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew has placed this Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in a section of his gospel which might be subtitled, *It’s Not About You*. It includes the refrain, “The last will be first, and the first will be last,” and it concludes with a prophecy of the Crucifixion, a not so subtle reminder that one who would be a disciple of Christ must *deny* one’s self, take-up a cross, and follow Jesus.

It’s not about you. It’s about God, and the goodness of God, and the grace of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ.

It’s not about you. That’s basically what the landowner tells the workers in his vineyard who grumble about the pay that they’ve received after a hard day’s work. Now we can understand why those workers were upset. They’d contracted with the landowner to work all day in his vineyard for a denarius, which was the usual pay for a day’s work of unskilled labor in Jesus’ day. It was a subsistence wage: you could feed yourself and your family on a denarius a day, but just barely. So they get to work around sun-up, and as the day progresses they are joined by other workers, and as twilight is approaching they all line-up to get paid. Nothing unusual here. But now it gets interesting. First of all, the workers who were hired last get paid first. They did the least amount of work, yet they’re the first to get paid. That must’ve raised a few eyebrows. And they get a denarius; the pay for a full day’s work. A few more eyebrows are raised. Then the other workers get paid; those who worked 3 hours, and 6 hours and 9 hours, until finally the first workers – those who worked 12 hours – get paid last. And they figure, “Hey, we’ve worked hard all day, we’ve done a *good* job, surely we’ll get paid more than all these others; ‘cause, after all, we haven’t been lazy and shiftless like some of these other guys, we’ve *earned* our wages. Pay-up, Mr. Manager.” But when they looked into the palms of their outstretched hands, they too had received but one denarius! The scripture says, “They *grumbled* against the landowner.” I suspect, more likely, they were almost *delirious* with rage! But when they confront the landowner he says, “Hey, I paid you what we contracted for. If I want to dig a little deeper into my treasury and pay these other near-starving workers and their families the same amount, that’s my business. Are you envious because I’m generous?” And Jesus concludes, “So the last shall be first and the first shall be last.”

Now, according to the norms of labor-management relations, this is nutso. Whether you’re the owner, the H.R. person or the union steward, all would agree that the guys who worked the longest should get paid more. Until we realize that this parable is about more than economics. It’s about grace. It’s not about a human system where there are winners and losers, where there are rewards given in strict exchange for services rendered; it’s about God’s system where there’s more than enough for everyone, and what is God’s is generously given to all.

It’s not about you. It’s about God. It’s about grace. The all-day workers are all puffed-up in their self-righteousness. And I think it’s especially this self-righteousness, this pride, this arrogant sense on the part of the all-day workers that they are somehow better than the other workers, this tendency toward self-righteousness that we *all* share; this is especially what Jesus’ is being critical of here.

You see a lot of self-righteousness in any community of human beings. We all are tempted to think, “My ideas are better than yours;” or, “I’ve worked harder than you have;” or, “I’m smarter than you are;” or, “I’m more kind or generous than you are;” or, “I’m a better Christian than you are.” Not that we say so publicly. We save such reflections for the private ponderings of our own hearts, or for conversations with a specially chosen few whom we trust and who we think will agree with us; where the “you” is always someone who is outside of that room; outside of that particular group.

At one time or another, we are all tempted by self-righteousness; we are all tempted to fall into what Reinhold Niebuhr calls the pride of virtue. This is part of the wisdom of St. Paul when he says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). God’s glory is reflected in God’s grace, which embraces all and places all on an equal footing before the throne of the Lord. Our sin is reflected in our temptation to judgment; in the pride of virtue.

We all fall into sin because we’re all caught-up in the precarious nature of human existence. The biblical view of human nature is that we are all creatures who are made in the image of God. This is revealed in the story of Adam and Eve, where like creatures we are made of the dust of the earth, but we are animated by the Spirit which God breathes into us (see Genesis 2:7). As creatures we are subject to all of the limitations of nature: we have finite bodies, we bear the wounds of our past, our knowledge is limited, we die. As image-bearers animated by the Spirit, we can imagine new possibilities that transcend everything that’s gone before; new possibilities for a glorious future that God, working through us, can realize. We are creatures of history, but we can rise above history just enough to see new possibilities and to work toward realizing them. The trouble is, given our limitations, we know we might fail. And given the very different possibilities that someone else might see – someone who might have more power than we do – we might be opposed and even defeated. We can rise above our limitations just enough to see how precarious our situation is. And this precarious reality of human nature triggers the fear that some other individual or group will oppose us or take advantage of us. Just like the all-day workers felt that the landowner and the part-day workers had taken advantage of them. We fear that someone or some group will take advantage of us. We see this most clearly in international relations – did anyone say North Korea? – but it emerges in any social situation, including families and churches. In our fear, we make accusations or launch pre-emptive strikes or engage in passive-aggressive behavior, or otherwise take action to minimize the damage that we fear is coming. And, in order to make ourselves feel more secure, we will ourselves to believe that we’re right and they’re wrong.

In other words, in our fear and our pride we tend to overestimate both our own virtue, and the righteousness of the causes and the groups with which we are associated; and we overestimate as well the sinfulness of those individuals or groups that oppose us. And those groups may be a nation, or a political party, or a church, or a group of family or friends within the church.

You know how many Christians it takes to change a light bulb? Well, it takes about 10 people to form the committee, but then they break into 2 factions, that argue so much about what kind of light bulb to replace it with and how much it’s going to cost and whether or not the light bulb really needs to be changed that the burned-out light bulb just sits there in the socket, and nothing happens.

It is so easy to think that my idea or my group is better than yours; so easy to think that we’re on different levels and of course *I’m* closer to God. But grace…grace is the great equalizer. It’s not about how good I am or about how great all of my work is; it’s about *God’s* great work of *grace*; God’s work of coming to us and to the whole world in Jesus Christ and embracing the whole world with God’s unconditional love and saving us all from sin. The *whole* world. And as our young people in Pastor’s Class pointed out last week, the world includes all the nations, all the creatures, all the mountains, all the canyons, all the people in this church…and you.

The landowner pointed out to the arrogant workers that there was no breach of contract; they were paid the amount that was agreed to. And there’s no breach of contract when God pours out God’s grace to all because such generous and unconditional grace is indeed at the *heart* of the contract; or, to use the biblical word, at the heart of the *covenant*. God so loved the whole world that God sent the only begotten Son, that *whosover* believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). The last time I checked, that includes every single person in this Sanctuary; including those whom you would prefer to have nothing to do with.

Biblical prophesy affirms that there will be a Final Judgment, and that’s part of the meaning that Matthew reads into Jesus’ parable. The good news is the mercy and the generosity of the One who will be calling the shots on the Last Day. Because the truth is, if the Final Judgment was based entirely on virtue, who among us would be left standing? The fact that *anyone* is saved has nothing to do with our own imagined virtue and *everything* to do with the fact that the One who sits on the Judgment Seat is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. It’s not about you, it’s not about me, and that’s a *good* thing! It’s all about the gentleness, the generosity, the grace of God, who oversees and guides and fulfills the whole drama of history; including the past, the present and the destiny of this congregation.

The future holds both peril and possibility. The trick is to not give in to our fear, and to focus on the One who is our hope. Amen.