

Matthew 20:1-16

The happiest congregation...the congregation where there is no bickering, no griping, no complaining of any kind, no name calling, jealousy, or envy is the congregation which has a membership of exactly one. But if that one member doubles the size of his church, the troubles will soon begin. I am speaking here in a ludicrous manner, of course. No church can have just one member. There must be a preacher and a hearer. "Where two or three are gathered..." says Jesus. And when you have two or three, or twenty or thirty, or more, then all the troubles that our fictitious congregation did not have become everyday occurrences.

The workers in Jesus' parable who were hired at six in the morning would have had no complaints if no other workers would have been hired throughout that day. But that is not how God's kingdom works. In His church there are faithful members, and members less faithful. There are members who give ten percent and more of their income, and members who barely give. There are members who serve in every way they can, and members who serve only when they have to. And this creates a problem. But not for God. He doesn't need any of us. If He wants His church to exist, and to be supported, and to be taken care of, and to grow, He will cause it to happen with or without us. If we think He needs us, that His kingdom here in Augusta cannot make it without us, then we are forgetting whose church this is.

Problems exist in congregations of more than one because when two or three or more are gathered, by nature they, we, carefully observe what others are doing, or not doing, and compare that with what we are doing. To understand Jesus' parable correctly, we need to look at who the audience was. The parable was directed at Peter and the other disciples who, in a boastful sort of way, said in Chapter 19: "We have left everything and followed you (Jesus)...(so) what will we have in return?" In answer Jesus promised them that they will have much in the life to come, but then He added this parable as a warning. He does not direct the parable to those who worked just one hour. He directs it at those who bore the burden of the day; to those who gave all they had to serve in God's kingdom. Yet, all of us, no matter how well we serve, no matter when God put us to work in His kingdom, can learn volumes from what Jesus has to say.

I think we would all agree that the thief on the cross who repented with his dying breath is a good example of those workers in the parable who were hired at the eleventh hour. This thief was standing around idle all his life doing absolutely nothing to serve God. Just before he died, Jesus called him into His kingdom of grace. He repented of his past life of sin, and to him Jesus gave the promise of eternal life. Do we begrudge what this thief was given? He will have the same joy in heaven that we will have, but he never put even a penny into the offering plate. He never served even one day on a church committee. He never worked at even one sausage dinner.

I think we do not begrudge that thief as much as we begrudge fellow members of the church who serve about as much as that thief did, but who have been in God's kingdom a whole lot longer than he was. And to such people who stand idle so long in God's church, who barely make an effort to serve, we need to ask: What are you waiting for? "Seek the Lord while He may be found," we heard the prophet Isaiah say today, "Call upon Him while He is near." The last hour is quickly approaching. God is calling sinners to repentance now because tomorrow may be too late. Today God is near to us through His Word proclaimed and His Sacraments given, but those of us who put off repenting of their sins, who put off serving in the church because they're never here to receive, who say to themselves, "I'll hear God's words next time," may discover that God may not have mercy tomorrow; there may not be a "next time" to heed His call.

A church member who stands idle day after day, year after year, who could serve in God's kingdom but does not, needs to understand that members are expected to serve. The master in the parable did not go out and hire workers to sit around and do nothing. No, he put them to work in his vineyard. Within God's church, within this congregation there should be members asking, without having to be asked, "How can I help? Where can I serve the Lord here?" Church members will serve in the church because works always follow faith. Where Christ lives within the hearts of His people, there He will work through such people to serve in His church. Serving the Lord is not something Christians can do; it's what they do because they love the Lord.

And this is also true, or it should be true, of church members who serve the Lord well. But sometimes such people get things mixed up. The workers in the parable who were hired at six in the morning quickly forgot why they were hired in the first place. Because they compared themselves with others, and their work with the work others were doing, they had the attitude that they deserved more in return. They were forgetting the same thing that we tend to forget. In God's kingdom, everything God gives, every good thing we receive is not earned, it is given only by grace. Jesus' church is not the kingdom of merit; it's called the kingdom of grace. Serving in the church is not done to earn favor and status before God; it's not done to gain a place in heaven. It's a privilege God gives to sinners like us, because we have received forgiveness, life, and salvation from Him and we want to show our thanks by serving Him, and serving Him well.

A lot of problems in the church would go away if we would stop watching what others are doing, and not doing, and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. When His Father called upon Him to serve, He never once hesitated. His service meant punishment for Him, but full pardon for you. His service meant death for Him, but life for you. It meant suffering in hell for Him, but sweet paradise for you. And yet Jesus served willingly, gladly, completely. When looking at our feeble efforts to thank Him, Jesus does not say: I deserve better thanks than that! Rather, He loves all that we do for Him and He forgives what is lacking. Compared to how Jesus served us with His life, sufferings, and death, not one of us serves God well. Compared with Jesus all of us fall short. But God does not compare you to Jesus. Rather, He looks at Jesus and He forgives you. His church, remember, is His kingdom of grace. He does not pay us what we deserve. If He did, we would all perish forever. But God gives us what we do not deserve. Because He is gracious and merciful, He gives what Jesus earned for you-- a place in heaven with Him.

We have here in Augusta a congregation of more than one. And because we do, comparisons are made, complaints are given, sinful things take place in and among us. But each one of you has a Savior who loves His redeemed sinners here at Christ Lutheran Church. If you have not served Him well in the past, Jesus forgives you. Now go and show your thanks by working harder in His church. Not because you have to, but because it's a privilege to serve and because you want to show Him your love in return. If you have been serving well, working hard for the Lord in His church, you have been tempted to compare yourself with others who work less than you do. Jesus forgives you also. He forgives you for looking down on others. Now go and look, not at what others are doing, or not doing, but at what your Savior has done for you. Count it a privilege that God allows you to serve in His church. See your works done here as works of love. And always remember that we are saved not by our works, but by grace alone.

We may be a congregation of more than one. But there is One here with us who makes this sinful congregation a forgiven congregation. And that One is Jesus. Amen.