

Matthew 20:1-16

I think that a few of us, when we were very little, actually did have our mouths washed out with soap. And some of us more than others. A potty mouth was not allowed...some parents grabbing the bar of Ivory to make that point. But even more necessary, at least in some cases, was to have the eyes washed out. I'm sure my parents were tempted to do that on numerous occasions, but they stopped short realizing the danger it posed to the eye.

I mention this because if we read the parable in our text using the original Greek language, the second to last phrase goes like this: "*Do you look with an evil eye on my goodness?*" The English translation does not do it justice: "*Do you begrudge my generosity?*"

But we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. Let's back up and set the stage. The master of the house goes out to hire laborers for his vineyard at different times through the day...at six in the morning, at nine, noon, three, and at five o'clock - just one hour before quitting time. He agrees with the workers he hires at six to pay them one denarius. A denarius is the typical coin given for a daily wage. But when the workers who are hired one hour before quitting time are given a denarius, the workers hired to work the entire twelve-hour day assume they will receive more. When they don't, they grumble at the master. "Hey! You're not playing fair!" is their complaint.

And do they not have a point? Now they do not have a legal leg to stand on because they had agreed to work for a denarius. But ethically it is unfair that they should be paid the same as those who barely broke a sweat during their one hour of labor.

The master in the parable is God. You and I are the workers. He has called us to work in His vineyard, His kingdom here on earth. And let's be honest...this is no candy kitchen, no cookie shop. It's hard work to labor in God's vineyard. It's the type of work that is not for the faint of heart.

We're not called into God's kingdom to loaf, to stand by and watch as others do all the work. We're called to be faithful; to be diligent in using God's Word; to be faithful here on Sunday mornings, faithful at the Holy Table, faithful in prayer. We're called upon to discipline ourselves; to walk away from temptation; to honor father and mother, and respect all in authority, and to live morally, not immorally. We're called to be witnesses; to not go along with the world, but walk with Christ even when it brings us shame and ridicule. We're called to resist the devil and not allow him to lead us away from the truths of the catechism we were taught.

All this is hard work. It would be much easier to live selfishly; pleasing our flesh; shunning those we do not like; using the entire weekend, including Sunday morning, for ourself; leaving the Bible unopened, and so forth. And then, just before quitting time...just before we die and leave this world, we come into God's kingdom and get to work and so receive the reward of heaven. Come on, admit it...you know it's true that it would be easier.

So perhaps those of us who have been hard at work within God's kingdom all our life have a slight attitude problem when we look at those who have not. It's not that we do not want them to repent and receive the reward of a denarius; the reward of heaven. We do. But our temptation is to act like the laborers who were hired at six in the morning. They grumbled at receiving the same reward as those hired just before quitting time. Why? They thought they had earned their reward. This is why they believed they deserved more than the others.

This is our temptation...to think that our hard work at being Christians earns us the reward of heaven. When we see how others are unfaithful, but we're always here sitting in the pew; how others give in to sin so easily, but we keep our noses clean, not to mention our mouth and eyes, we see it as God's grace if they make it into heaven, but for us, it's because we're so sure and steady. We're good kingdom workers. We're the ones God counts on. So for us, it's not really by grace. It's more because we've merited our reward by being good, hard-working Christians.

But friends, this parable is a warning to those who are the six o'clock workers, not to the five in the afternoon workers. They have the Old Testament lesson for today to warn them. "*Seek the Lord while He may be found,*" it says, "*Call upon Him while He is near.*" This is their warning. And a dire warning it is! What would we think of the man who has a winning lottery ticket (let's say it was given to him by a friend, and then his friend passed away), but that man waits until just before the ticket expires to drive to the lottery office to validate his ticket. And on the way he gets into a horrific traffic jam, and before he can reach the lottery office, his ticket expires. Why did he wait? Well, he was busy. One thing after another filled his day, each and every day. If that winning ticket was worth hundreds of millions, we would call that man a fool.

And what else can we call those who put off seeking the Lord while He may be found? Jesus is our dear Friend who died in giving us the winning ticket. The prize is eternal life - the reward of heaven. To say to oneself, "I'll come just before quitting time to redeem the ticket Jesus gave me," is the most foolish thing anyone could do. And think of this...those five o'clock workers in the parable did not waltz over into the vineyard and say, "Here we are...hire us!" It's the master who went out and called them to work in the vineyard. Anyone who keeps putting off the Lord; who keeps saying, "It's not close enough to quitting time yet; I'm too busy right now for Jesus' church," may find out that Jesus will be too busy for him when it's quitting time. "*Seek the Lord while He may be found,*" the prophet warns. No one can repent on his own and waltz into heaven. The Lord is the master who called the five o'clock workers for his vineyard.

But he also called the workers hired at 6, at 9, at noon, and at 3. Not one worker came by his own strength. Each one was called by the master into the vineyard. And this we must understand. You are a Christian in God's vineyard, brought in through Holy Baptism, not because you came in on your own. It's Jesus who called you in. He sought you. He invited you. He drew you into His kingdom.

Those of us who have been in God's kingdom all our life, and who have been sure and steady workers, it's just as much by God's grace as it is for the one called in just before quitting time. And if we don't think it is, then we aren't in God's kingdom. Jesus' church here on earth is called the kingdom of grace. It's only by grace that anyone is brought into it and continues to stay in it.

So in the parable, those all-day workers were in danger of having an evil eye. Not an evil eye toward the five o'clock workers; an evil eye on the master and his goodness. They wanted the reward to be given based on merit and not upon the goodness of the master. But this is not how God operates. If He gave us what we deserve, none of us would receive the reward of heaven. Your hard work as a Christian is not done to receive a reward. The reward is already yours in your Baptism. Your Christian life flows out of that sacred water, for now the Holy Spirit works in you.

Satan has an evil eye on God's goodness. He hates it that God is gracious to sinners like us. That is not the eye we want. If our eyes are fixed on what we do for the Lord, evil is lurking near, for we, like the workers in the parable, will think we deserve what God gives us by grace. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. His eyes were fixed on the cross. His eyes closed in death. But His eyes opened on the third day so that His eyes look upon you in love. He merited the reward of heaven for you. He gives you heaven purely as a gift. He does not give you what your sins deserve. He forgives your sins. He forgives you.

And this is why you are free to labor in His vineyard. You don't have to; you want to. You want to live as a Christian because you are loved by God. You see it as a privilege to work in His kingdom. Quitting time is coming. Soon the master will come with your reward. It's a reward given by grace no matter who you are, no matter how long you have worked in the vineyard. Amen.