

Delaware-Maryland Synod Online Worship Service
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
20 September 2020
Matthew 20:1-16

Beloved: grace, mercy and peace be yours and mine from God and our savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

We Lutherans believe we have the theological corner on grace. In a very ungraceful way, we are so proud that we have foresworn the revolting thought of anyone getting into heaven by doing even one good work. Admittedly, we are both saint and sinner, but that sinful nature is mitigated by grace, and that saintly identity is a gift of grace.

Still, most of us are not quite as enamored with grace as we claim. That God saves the good, the bad, and the ugly with no apparent distinctions can be downright offensive. Grace feels very unamerican -- like giving a leg up to someone who hasn't done nearly as much as we think we have done. Even if God saves "those" people, too; well, at least *we'll* be getting something akin to top floor ocean front views from *our* mansion in heaven, even while *they* are stuck with a lower level view of the parking lot.

In our gospel, Jesus offends those of us who believe in an honest day's pay for an honest day's work. We, who would never dream of coming onto a job in the last hours of the afternoon and expect to be paid the same as the person showing up at seven in the morning. We work hard and deserve every cent we get; how can Jesus commend something so outrageous? After all, many of us have been saved by grace our whole lives long; we've dedicated and sacrificed something of ourselves for the sake of this church we love; doesn't God care that we were here first, that we have been so faithful?

Frederick Buechner says this of grace: "Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about anymore than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace... A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing you have to do... Indeed, being able to be open to grace, to receive it, is grace, too" (*originally published in Wishful Thinking and later in Beyond Words*)

Beloved, it is so easy to mess up the beauty of grace, to end up believing we must offer God some of our expert assistance in the process of being saved and God saving the world!

That isn't to say that we ought not do works of justice and mercy for the sake of God's broken and hurting creation, no, Martin Luther encapsulates that well: God doesn't need our works, but our neighbor does. And so we do. Our Lutheran social ministry agencies collectively touch one in every 50 Americans; Lutheran Disaster Response and Lutheran World Relief are so often the agencies that are first on the scene and stay until lives are restored and our siblings can sustain themselves; our work and support for domestic and world hunger are making tangible, measurable changes to alleviate the shame that some go hungry when so much is wasted in a world God created that provides enough for all -- and yet, despite all that good, don't we occasionally resent having to bear that load? We love these ministries, and those they serve, and well we should; but then shouldn't our pews be full with "reinforcements," shouldn't people

flock to our churches and ministries ready to give us some relief and share the burden? If we're being *really* honest, shouldn't we get a little more credit?

But, no. Instead, the Lutheran Church mirrors the crises that are very much a part of the rest of the culture; when we struggle under the burden of homogeneity and can't seem to grow younger and more diverse like the populations around us; we get discouraged and retreat from the scandal of the gospel, from the pure gift of God's grace. Often we do it to ourselves with our inabilities to pass on power and share authority with those who have come after us; deluding ourselves into believing that "membership" in the church, a thoroughly unbiblical concept apart from baptism, confers some sort of privilege; reinforcing that the buildings our congregations inhabit and steward are "ours" and gatekeeping who can come, meet or celebrate there. We are captive to our dislike of change, we are in bondage to our traditions – and cannot free ourselves, and so we sin against God and neighbor by not loving them both with our whole heart. And, in so doing, the gift of grace is corrupted, the beauty of God's free gift is obstructed.

St. John Chrysostom was the archbishop of Constantinople in the fourth century. He preached a sermon that continues to be read in Eastern Orthodox churches every Easter. His sermon might surprise those among us who tend to look down our noses at folks who show up just on Easter. You know the kind, they'd never consider setting foot in the church a chilly September Sunday morning and yet, to our disgust, parade their dressed-up families up the center aisle every Easter morning, capriciously sitting in *our* pew so they can smell the lilies *we* paid for and sing "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" like *they* own the place.

The first time I heard Chrysostom's sermon, with it's olde fashioney introduction, I was sure he was going to let *them* have it. But, listen to these words that have endured over sixteen centuries:

LET THOSE WHO have toiled since the first hour, let them now receive their due reward; let any who came after the third hour be grateful to join in the feast, and those who may have come after the sixth, let them not be afraid of being too late; for the Lord is gracious and He receives the last even as the first...He has pity on the last and He serves the first...Come you all: enter into the joy of your Lord. You the first and you the last, receive alike your reward; you rich and you poor, dance together; you sober and you weaklings, celebrate the day. (Chrysostom *Paschal Homily*)

Sounds a bit like Jesus, don't you think? The same Jesus, who I might add, without distinction, week by week, no matter what dastardly and bastardly things we've done, no matter how we've struggled to love our neighbor as ourselves, the same Jesus – who was not the blonde, blue-eyed, well-fed, well-bred, neatly dressed, respectable European our stained glass windows portray him as; no, with nail-scarred hands and having borne the burden of our sin, in Word and Sacrament, Jesus says to you, and to all of us, *all of us* who are the workers hired at the end of the day, "This is me. For You. All of you." And but for a moment, we taste, and see, and remember how amazing God's grace is, again.

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