

St. Peter Lutheran Church
February 1, 2026
Septuagesima
Matthew 20:1-16

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

And as our Lord tells the story, we hear that the landowner hires many laborers for his vineyard. He hires some early in the morning and they agree upon a wage of a denarius for the day, and he sent them into the vineyard. He continually goes out and calls more, all throughout the day. Some were hired at the third hour who had been standing idle in the marketplace. He said to them, **“You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.” So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found other standing idle, and said to them, “Why have you been standing here idle all day? They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.**

The landowner calls many. He goes out continually to call more and more. And until he hires them, they stand there idle, doing nothing. But when the landowner hires them, they are given a purpose for the day, and they are promised provision at the end of the day.

So far, so good. But then comes the evening, when **the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, “Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.” And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.** Now this is surprising. This was the wage agreed upon with the laborers who were hired first thing in the morning and had worked all day in the vineyard. This is certainly generous of the owner to give this full day’s wage to those who were hired right before the work day ended. **But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more.** If the wage they agreed upon at the start of the day was given to those who barely worked, they must have much more coming. **But they likewise received each a denarius.**

Now this is surprising and not how we thought the story would go, but remember, this is a story about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is ruled by the LORD, who says, **“My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,”...“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.”** His kingdom is not what we would imagine it to be. His kingdom is according to His decrees. The kingdom of heaven must be revealed to us and taught to us. He must come to us and call us into His kingdom. Until He does, we stand idle with no meaningful labor whatsoever. We strive for riches that fail, we store up stuff in barns that when we die is given to others. Vanity of Vanities—all is vanity. But when we are called into His kingdom, our works are given meaning,

our labor is no longer in vain. By His gracious call, we are given a purpose, a hope, and a future. At the end of the day, we will be provided for.

This is all by God's grace. And yet, having been called into His Kingdom, there is indeed work to be done. There is a race to be run, there is a good fight that needs to be fought. As those outside the kingdom labor for perishable crowns, we run and fight for the imperishable crown. And as we fight the fight and run the race, there is a temptation that think our place in the kingdom is due to our striving, but its not—its because he found us standing idle and hired us. He gave us a place in the kingdom before we lifted a finger for Him. And the reward at the end of the day—don't think its your due for your labors, its not. When the sun is setting and our life draws to an end, heaven will be waiting for us—provisions not for a 24 hour day but for an eternal day. Each of us will receive this same blessing. No matter if we were hired at the beginning of the day or at the eleventh hour—no matter if we have borne the burden and the heat of the day or whether we have not yet broken a sweat—the same reward belongs to each of us.

Is this fair? No, of course its not. But we really don't want fair. Fair would mean no reward at all. Fair would mean eternal death and punishment. Unfair is the fact that each of us receive a heavenly reward. Because whatever we were up to before we were hired into the vineyard, it was no good. Idleness is really too nice of a word. Darkness is better. Slaves to sin is accurate. But God called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light. No matter how many years we labor for the Lord, we can never tip the scales in our favor—death and hell is what we deserve. Our works will never save us. So that payday is entirely by God's grace for each and every one of us. It's a payday that comes not by our works, but God's works on our behalf. It's a payday that comes by God sending His only Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Heaven belongs to us because God, in His grace, sent His only begotten Son into the world to bear our iniquities, to drink the cup of God's wrath on our sins, and to suffer death in our place, in order to deliver life and salvation to us.

And so it was, early in the morning, that the ladies went to the tomb and found Christ risen. And from that early morning until now, Christ has hired more and more laborers into his vineyard, and He will continue to do so until the full number is gathered in. Then, the evening of this world will be the dawn of the age to come, and our heavenly reward, earned by Christ and given to us as a gift, will belong to us.

And for those entering heaven, there will be no one crying, "No fair." For we all know it's entirely by God's grace that we were in the vineyard to begin with, serving such a good Lord. And heaven was not earned by us but is His gift, earned by Christ. It belongs to Him and He can share it as He wishes.

So we run the race and fight the fight. Our labor is not to earn anything. Our labor is to keep the faith. It's to fight against our sinful flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit. We discipline our bodies and bring them into subjection. Not to earn anything, but rather to not be overcome by our

sinful flesh, the world, and the devil, who all seek to tear us from the kingdom and return us to the slavery of sin and death.

In addition to the labor of subduing the flesh, there are labors for the good of the Kingdom. We diligently work to promote the Gospel, we train up our children in the faith, we give generously a portion back to the Lord for the good of His Kingdom. These works which the Lord has given us are meaningful and with eternal consequence. These works will follow us when we die, when we are joined by our children, our fellow parishioners, and other Christians in heaven.

And As we go about our work in the vineyard, we will face persecution. This too is part of the burden we bear and the heat of the day we are subjected to in the vineyard, but we count all this as joy as we take up our crosses and follow Christ.

The temptation always exists to be like the Israelites, redeemed from slavery, who then grumble against the Lord for their testings in the wilderness. But the trials in the wilderness, the battle of the Spirit we've been given against the sinful flesh, these labors are not in vain. The Lord is with us. He supports us in the battle. He empowers us for our labors. For the Israelites, he rained bread from heaven and brought forth water from a rock. But their true provision was not bread alone but the spiritual Rock who is Christ. They hoped in Him to come, we hope in Him who has come and has conquered. The enemies that trouble us, Christ has already defeated. We draw our strength from Him. Him who was struck for our iniquities, from whom living water flows. He who is living bread come down from heaven. He who gives His blood to drink. He strengthens and keeps us. This life of labor is a life lived under His loving care. So how could we ever say, no fair, I've labored longer, when what that really means is that we've lived under the loving care of our Savior for longer. No fair is right—we have received what we have not deserved—we have been invited to labor in the vineyard now and receive heaven at the end of the day, not by our works, but by God's grace. Amen.