

Sermon for Septuagesima Sunday – Matthew 20:1-16

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

What is the purpose of life? For many people out there, it doesn't seem to have any definite purpose. If we were to ask someone about the purpose of their life, some people we encounter would have difficulty explaining it. The prevailing idea of life's purpose in American culture is mostly nothing more than this, "Let's eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. And if you can help a few people along the way, all the better, but NEVER sacrifice the pursuit of your own happiness."

But the Gospel for today teaches us what the real purpose for our life is. Our purpose in life is serving God. That each of us does his callings and vocations in faith and love according to God's Word and instruction. That's where true happiness is. Only there is meaning in our life. So naturally, our life with purpose is depicted as a workday in a vineyard. "For the Kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard."

The Kingdom of Heaven is called a vineyard in this parable. Why does God want us to work in this vineyard, in His Kingdom? Because He needs us? Nope, He doesn't. He's God. He has everything. So why does He call us? Because He wants what's best for our eternity. "'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came ... each of them also received a denarius." That's why God also promises everyone the same reward, both those who came earliest and those who came at the last hour. He calls us to HIS service. If we intend to serve ourselves, we can't serve Him. If we intend to serve God, we must not go by our own mind, but by what He says.

What then is His will? Jesus was once asked what must be done to receive eternal life. What was the answer? God's requirement is holiness – perfect love for God and perfect love for our neighbor. God's requirement is holiness and we soon learn that we can't really do this. But since holiness is the requirement and it must be fulfilled and God doesn't want us to be lost, He sent His Son who did everything in our place. That's the Gospel. By Him we are reconciled to God. By Him we receive a good, clean conscience. By Him we can truly love. God wants us to believe in Christ and to hear Him. Whoever does this is God's servant and will be saved.

Whoever believes in Christ loves God and serves God. This truth will come to light in the fact that we daily strive to do God's will – not in order to be saved by this, but in order to thank God because we are saved. "For faith alone can justify. Works serve our neighbor and supply the proof that faith is living." Those who despise and neglect God's Word, who don't even bother to hear what He says – how can they be among His servants? Also, those who want to be honest, kind, and respectable solely because of the earthly benefits they receive from it are not God's servants either.

Working in God's vineyard [or Kingdom] can sound like a bit of an abstraction. But let it not be so. God's Kingdom is a two-fold concrete reality here on earth. On the one hand, it is our homes. On the other hand, it is the house of God. As our homes, I'm not talking about the physical structure: the boards, beams, shingles, and paint. I'm talking about the people. Some of them may live under our roof, some may not. God has knit us together as fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters. Have we taken the time to care for those people? Have we served them only when asked or only when it was convenient for us? Have we neglected

our tasks in God's vineyard? Let us not reject this work! It's through these very tasks we serve God. Our vocation of menial chores in our homes may be lowly in the eyes of the world, but when we strive to do them well and faithfully that is the work God wants to have from us, and He is pleased.

On the other hand of the vineyard is the house of God. Again, I don't mean the building here. I'm talking about the Lord who dwells here. He is the One who works a good work in us. The "work" of this vineyard is nothing more than us receiving the benefits of his death and resurrection of Christ through Word and Sacrament. That's how we're saved. But have His Word and Sacraments been THE priority of our lives in our thoughts, in our time, in our finances? Have we looked to His Word first for guidance in our life and daily decisions?

When we strive to change our own heart, to grow in knowledge, in humility, in faith, in thanks, and in sanctification, to cast off our vices and sinful desires, that is the work God wants us to have. Remember: not only the tree that bears bad fruit is cut down, but also the tree that doesn't bear good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. If we reflect honestly, we have much to prune and trim away. But there is also much to nurture as the new man also dwells in us. So we should help each other, strengthen each other, and comfort each other, especially those closest to us. "And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.'" Without each other, how else would we finish everything before evening?

"For the Kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." We are all called to work in God's vineyard through Holy Baptism. Like the men in the parable who had no daily work to look forward to, and no purpose in life, we were given it as a gift. We have it: "We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." We don't run aimlessly or box as one beating the air. With purpose, we press toward the wreath imperishable won by Christ Jesus.

God promises this reward. "... [E]ach of them received a denarius." As in the payment in the parable, none of us has earned it. Only our Lord Jesus has. We should be glad in Him and cling to Him. If we do that, we will avoid exalting ourselves, judging others, and begrudging Christ's generosity, which, as life-long Baptized Christians, we are strictly warned NOT to do.

Jesus would make a pretty crumby businessman by today's standards. Seeking out one lost sheep and leaving 99. Forgiving a debt of millions of dollars to a sniveling worker. Being ripped off by a trusted employee and then commending him for it. Or as in this parable today, making several trips to hire workers, instead of hiring them all at once. Then paying them the same wage for unequal work would not only be an HR nightmare, but completely corrupt.

But that's what makes the Kingdom of Heaven different from every other kingdom. It operates on grace. God's grace. And that grace alone. So Jesus is a lousy businessman. But He's the perfect Savior. Rejoice in Him who puts Himself last so that we will be first. "Since Christ has full atonement made/And brought to us salvation,/each Christian therefore may be glad/And build on this foundation./Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead,/Your death is not my life indeed,/For You have paid my ransom." Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠