

I am sure you have heard it said from this pulpit more than once that God gives each of us gifts, and that, together, these varied gifts make up the church, called by the Spirit into service in the world. The green stole I am wearing tells you what some of my gifts are in this community – I am called to preach, to teach, and to administer the sacraments of baptism and holy communion.

Let me tell you what one of my gifts is not: math. I never did well at math, always struggled to get my figures and equations straight. It's not as though I'm a pastor *because* I am bad at math. In fact, I know many wonderful pastors who are terrific at math, pastors who even majored in math in college. But I am not one of those pastors.

And *as* a pastor who is not good at math, my ears perk up when I hear Jesus' parable for this morning. Because in the story Jesus tells, Jesus flunks one of the most basic arithmetic problems that I'm sure most of us have been assigned at some time in our lives. You know the problem. It goes something like this:

"Mrs. Smith pays her workers eight dollars an hour to work on her yard. Sally works for twelve hours. Jimmy works for two. How much more money does Sally earn than Jimmy?"

For those of you working it out in your head – Sally makes ninety-six dollars and Jimmy makes sixteen. So Sally makes eighty more dollars than Jimmy.

What does this math problem teach us? Well, it teaches multiplication of course. But it teaches students so much more than this. It teaches important cornerstones of our market-based economy.

It teaches that working hard gets you paid! It teaches that working less leaves you eighty dollars behind. It teaches us that Sally is worth more than Jimmy because she put in the work. It teaches that Mrs. Smith needs to incentivize yard work in order to have it completed, and she adjusts her hourly pay rate to reflect the supply of the workers at her disposal and the demand of the very urgent lawn care she hopes to have completed.

Jesus also grew up in a world where pay and goods were regularly exchanged for services. So Jesus knew the rules. And as the son of a carpenter, I'm sure he solved more than a few math problems in his life. So this morning, as a teaching tool, Jesus turns to our classic Mrs. Smith math problem as a sermon illustration.

Except Jesus' math problem goes like this:

Mrs. Smith owns a vineyard. She needs a lot of work done so she goes out at 6 AM and finds a crew. She agrees to pay them a good daily wage. Adjusted for 2017 numbers, let's say it was something like \$15/hour. This vineyard owner is not interested in exploiting her workers or skimping on what she needs to pay out. She's fair, and a good employer.

Then, as Jesus tells it, 9 AM rolls around and Mrs. Smith realizes she needs more workers. So she hires more. She does the same thing at noon and at 3:00 PM. To these latecomers she says only, "I will pay you what is right." And they go.

And then, at 5 PM, Mrs. Smith needs more workers in her vineyard. So she drives to the same hiring center where she had found all of her other workers, and she asks the people there, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They reply, "Because no one has hired us."

I wonder – were they not hired because there simply wasn't enough work to go around? Or were they not hired, as so many aren't, because they were living with an illness or a disability? Where they not hired because they were too young, or too old? Were they not hired because they lacked the proper work ID? Or perhaps they weren't hired because they just slept in all day.

Whatever the reason, our vineyard owner tells this group of jobless, unemployable people to hop in the back of her pickup truck, and she gets them to the vineyard for the final hour of the day. 6 PM rolls around, and the work day is over.

So Jesus' math problem parable comes to a pause, and the inevitable question hangs in the air...How much more money did the 6 AM workers make than the 5 PM workers that nobody wanted to hire?

Now, if you wanted an A in math class in the United States of America in 2017, you would answer \$165 more.

But if you wanted an A in the kingdom of heaven, you would answer \$0. And here is the scandal of Jesus' bad math parable. Not only does the vineyard owner asks that those who were hired last receive their payment first, but she then pays them the full amount for the day, as though they too had done twelve hours of work, not one.

Upon receiving these unusually fat pay envelopes, these last workers couldn't help but go and share this news with everyone else waiting in line. They may have wondered if it was a mistake. Or, perhaps they just couldn't contain their joy – finally, for those who nobody would hire, something had gone their way!

And those who had been working since 6 AM? Well, they're not very happy.

So by now it should be fairly clear that Jesus is not at all concerned with good market-based, work/reward, supply/demand economics. What Jesus describes instead is an economics of grace. What Jesus describes is the kingdom of heaven. And, depending on where you sit, the economy of grace can, at first, either sound great or pretty troubling.

Because, in the economy of grace, only one thing is true: God's grace is given to all, and this grace is pointless.

What do I mean by pointless? Well, I mean that God's grace is not merit-based. Salvation is like a line that all of us stand in, and, when we get to the front – no matter where we've been or what we've done – we receive the same thing. "The kingdom of heaven is like this," says Jesus. Those who come late to the party still get to fully enjoy it.

But we also must pay attention to the judgment in this parable. Notice who the vineyard owner judges most harshly at the end the parable – it is *not* those who come late and get paid an extraordinary amount for the little work they perform. The judgment is for those who worked all day and who, at the end of the day, were still paid more than fairly, as promised.

The judgment is for those who would actually have been *happier* if their neighbors were paid less – because, for them, the problem is not that they were paid unfairly (God's grace is always far too generous); the problem is that they believe that those other people who they consider losers and lazy, the lost and the least, are paid way too much. It doesn't seem fair to these workers.

But God's judgment is never a question of who is in and who is out, who's on top and who's on bottom. Remember: at the end of the day, everyone gets paid, all are rewarded, all are treated equally.

In the kingdom of heaven, judgment comes for those who are unable to accept that they have already been accepted, regardless of merit or privilege. Rejection is found in the self-isolation and self-righteousness that separates us from a God who has already accepted us *all*, a God who always follows through on his promises.

Because look at the miracle of this story. God the vineyard owner actually scoops up the unhirable and unemployable, the last and the least, and at the end of the day gives them hope, new life, a future! How can we ignore that this is good news? If we, like those 6 AM workers, reject such a miraculous story, it would reveal that we would rather worship the god of profit and market-based economics than the living God who promises to make all things new.

God's grace is for all, and this grace is pointless.

One of my favorite theologians, Robert Capon, writes, "Bookkeeping is the only punishable offense in the kingdom of heaven." No offense to all of the bookkeepers here – your work is indeed valuable and important to the community.

What Capon means by bookkeeping is not the literal vocation of it. He's talking about that inner part of ourselves that is constantly tallying points. "Who is right and who is wrong? Who works hard and who is lazy? Who deserves success and who does not? Who has the right to be here and who does not?" We tally points of who among us *has*, and who has *not*; who has *earned* respect and favor, and who is suspicious, sketchy, different.

Bookkeeping – point scoring – is the only punishable offense in the kingdom of heaven. It is not God who punishes us, as God daily gives us *everything* out of love. Instead it is we who punish ourselves. When we get so wrapped up in what we believe we deserve – and in what we believe our neighbor does *not* deserve – we become trapped in a judgment of our own making.

Which is why this grace of God (that is for all and is pointless), comes to us when we follow in the way of Christ. This grace comes through dying and rising again. We must die to the point-scoring and the bookkeeping. With Christ, we must die to that part of ourselves that is so concerned with credit, with work/reward, with earning our own salvation.

We must die to this part of ourselves and be made new. We who belong to this body of Christ are called to be kingdom of heaven people. Like those vineyard workers, we gather here every week in order to stand in a line that leads to the altar. When we get there, the grace we receive in our hands is the same for all. No matter if you've been a part of this community of faith for fifty-five years or five days. No matter if you've kept the faith your whole life or are curious about why any of this matters at all.

We stand in a line. It's a line that depends not at all on when you got here, where you're from, who you know, or how much money you give. Before God, with hands outstretched, we all are debtors in the economy of grace. But it is a debt that has already been fully paid. There is nothing more you can do to earn this love, this grace. In Christ, the score has already been settled. This grace is for you, and it is nothing but a gift undeserved.

## CHILDREN'S MESSAGE ??

Play the video...

Pictures of children

Do you like playing games?

How does it feel to win? How does it feel to lose?

Sometimes, we can make the mistake of feeling like, when we win, we're actually *better* than the people who lose.

Jesus tells a story

Did you see the picture of those kids from Liberia? Liberia is a country in West Africa. Many of the families who belong to our community here are from Liberia.

And you can see that the children over there, well, they're kids just like you, right?

But their schools aren't as nice. They don't always have the same access to education and good teachers that we have in New Brighton.

But remember Jesus' story – there are no winners and losers, only children of God.

So today we pray for our brothers and sisters in Liberia, and we pray to God that, one day, all of God's children can go to good schools, etc...

Building a school. You know

We are so grateful for the Liberian members of Christ the King – we give thanks for them today...

## 6<sup>TH</sup> GRADE CONFIRMATION LESSON

Parents, share a memory with your child about the day they were baptized

Kids – do you remember or know anything about your baptism?

Read the promises over again

Sprinkle with water lots and lots

We are going to learn about...

Worship

Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer

How is God calling me?

Where is God in my life?