

9.24.2023 Time after Pentecost, 17

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 145:1-8; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

“The joy of being called”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

When Jesus tells parables about the kingdom of heaven, he is proclaiming its nearness to us in daily life. Parables about the kingdom encourage us to also remember the words Jesus teaches us to pray: “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*” These parables help us see that God’s kingdom comes into our everyday lives as the inbreaking of God’s grace on earth as it is in heaven.

Today’s parable reminds us that God’s call itself is grace, and God calls all people at every hour of their lives. God’s call comes at the start of life, early in life, mid-life, late in life, and at the end of life. God calls all people into God’s kingdom of grace. Grace is not something we earn; rather, grace is something we are called to respond to at every hour of our lives. Grace is a gift, and grace is unearned, because God is abounding in steadfast love.

Today’s parable goes against the economic marketplace of the world – and Jesus knows it. Jesus tells this parable because human beings can often look at their relationship with God as an economic transaction. We give our time, talents, and offerings – we give our lives – and we may also say, “So God, what am I going to get in return?” “God, what’s in it for me?” Rather than viewing our lives as a response to God’s grace, human beings can view God’s grace as payment for labor.

Peter certainly seemed to think so because today’s gospel about laborers in the vineyard was occasioned by a question that Peter asked Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “*We have left everything to follow you! What then will we have?*” (Mt. 19:27). To put it bluntly, Peter was asking something like, “Jesus, what are we going to get out of following you?” The disciples *had left* everything to follow Jesus, so perhaps Peter’s question seems natural enough. Jesus replied to Peter with words of grace, saying that everyone who has left home, family, or fields for him, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. No matter the hour in our lives, God gives grace sufficient for each person.

Of course, those who had been called first to the vineyard expected to receive more than those who had been called last. The owner of the vineyard, said to those who grumbled, “*Friend, I am doing you no wrong...are you envious because I am generous?*” Jesus’ parable should cause us to

ask not “what” but “who” am I laboring for with my life?

Peter’s question, “*What then will we have?*” illustrates a common human expectation about grace. Because we work within the economy of this world, we may think that God’s economy is the same. Perhaps Peter and the disciples, early in their journey had also wondered about the sacrifices they were making for this man named Jesus. Perhaps their families and friends had pointed out to them that they weren’t making money, or that they had given up home, family, and livelihood to follow Jesus.

Peter’s question, “*What then will we have?*” though understandable, was the wrong question. It’s not “what” but “who” am I laboring for with my life? The words, “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*” puts the labors of our lives in perspective. To live is to labor in God’s grace and for God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

Paul’s words to the Philippians, “*For to me, living is Christ, and dying is gain,*” stand in contrast to Peter’s question. Paul seems totally unconcerned about “what” he would get out of following Christ. His concern, rather, is only with laboring for the one who called him. When Paul wrote these words to the Philippians, he was imprisoned very likely in Rome for his faith; yet he wrote, “*For to me, living is Christ.*”

Paul is clearly describing the life of a laborer in God’s vineyard. To labor for the kingdom of heaven means living for Christ. For Paul, life is not about what he will receive, rather it is, “*living is Christ and dying is gain.*” Paul is leaning into the promise of baptism: that we are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. So then whether we live or die, whether our lives are short or long, we already live within the grace of Jesus, laboring in the vineyard with all people.

For each of us, the call to labor in the vineyard, may come at 6 am, 9 am, noon, 3 pm, or 5 pm – it may come early in life, mid-life, late in life, or at the end of life, but at each hour it is the same call of God’s grace. As Paul encouraged the Philippians, he encourages us to live with joy, writing, “*Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.*”

Never have words about the need for unity of faith in the church been so well stated. We don’t live simply as individuals in an economic marketplace; rather, we live as Christ’s body the church – standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side, working together with one mind for Christ. Paul was addressing a church divided at Philippi; yet, in any congregation, it is tempting to think that those who have been members longer should receive a greater share of leadership, decision

making, and dare we say it – even God’s grace!

Paul certainly understood this. He had been called to follow Jesus late in the day. Paul had spent his early life as a Pharisee and persecutor of the church. Those who were Christians long before Paul not only feared him, but perhaps resented this upstart who worked among gentiles, among foreigners, the Greeks, Africans and Asians of the ancient world. For Paul, the vineyard is not only the first called of Israel, but also this whole world that God so loves and all its people.

Think about those who were called late in the day: they may have been the weak, the vulnerable, the foreigner, the sinner, the outcast. The parable reminds us that they were present, but not selected. Imagine their fear and sorrow at being overlooked. Jesus’ parable encourages us to see that no one is left out of God’s gracious call to labor in the vineyard.

If we read this parable in light of the whole world, we too are part of the “late in the day” crowd. We are part of the gentile outsiders called late to grace – a fact which should make us sensitive to all who seem excluded from grace. “*Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven*” reminds us that the joy of being called is God’s grace for all people – to the least of these, the weak, vulnerable and the stranger, so that God’s gracious will extends to all people on earth!

Grace is how God labors for you; so that you might believe, labor, and even suffer for Christ and your neighbor. Live for Christ and stand firm with your neighbor.

Imagine this world without God’s message of love here on earth as it is in heaven. Over your lifetime, your labor for Christ is the way to eternal life with your neighbor.

You have been called to resist prejudice and fear of others by living in a manner worthy of Christ. Whether we are called early or late, God’s grace makes us into one people.

Stand firm in the joy of God’s grace given in equal measure to all people.

Strive side by side with your neighbor for the gospel. Amen.