MATTHEW 20:1–16. (EHV)

> "Indeed the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After agreeing to pay the workers a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. He also went out about the third hour and saw others standing unemployed in the marketplace. To these he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing. When he went out about the eleventh hour, he found others standing unemployed. He said to them, 'Why have you stood here all day unemployed?' They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He told them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When it was evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last group and ending with the first.' When those who were hired around the eleventh hour came, they each received a denarius. When those who were hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But they each received a denarius too. After they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner: 'Those who were last worked one hour, and you made them equal to us who have endured the burden of the day and the scorching heat!' But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not make an agreement with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go. I want to give to the last one hired the same as I also gave to you. Can't I do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' In the same way, the last will be first, and the first, last."

What is fair? What if a student studied hard all week for a math test, while one of her classmates just fiddle-dinked around, and on the day of the test she calmly reviewed while the classmate frantically crammed, and then both tests received A+'s? Would that be fair?

What if the person who crossed the finish line first and the one who crossed dead last both received gold medals? Would that be fair?

The answer seems obvious to us all. But in our Gospel for today, Jesus turns the concept of "fair" on its head, with regard to his grace. "In the same way, the last will be first, and the first, last," he says. That doesn't sound fair, does it?

But God defines what's fair in spiritual affairs, and he holds the keys to heaven and hell. So instead of debating whether or not God is acting fairly, let's open our ears and hear God out. "The last will be first, and the first, last." Jesus's words are a strong warning to those who think they are entitled to more. They are an immense comfort to those who know they deserve less.

1.

Peter had just asked Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you! What then will we have?" Peter and the disciples had indeed given up much to follow Jesus. Some gave up their jobs. Others gave up lives of comfort and social standing. And Jesus acknowledged that. "Everyone who has left homes or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, because of my name, will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But," Jesus quickly added, "many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Jesus obviously intended his words as a warning to Peter and the other disciples, but you can imagine them thinking, "What's that supposed to mean?" Their Savior did not want them to remain confused, and so he immediately illustrated this truth before they even had a chance to ask him what it meant.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner," Jesus began. And what a landowner he is! We can see him rousing himself before the rooster. He dresses himself in the dark and leaves the house at the crack of dawn. There is work to be done and he wants to hire workers to do it.

With the sun barely peeking over the horizon, he arrives at the marketplace, and there he finds some men. In the silence of the morning he strikes an agreement with them. They will work in his vineyard the entire twelve working hours of the day, and he will give them the standard pay for that work, a denarius, roughly equal to about $150 today. Both parties are happy. The landowner returns to his vineyard with workers, and the workers head out to his vineyard without worries. They don't need to stand around wondering what they will be doing today. They don't need to worry about where their food will be coming from today. They have purpose and provision today.

About the third hour, nine a.m., the landowner returns to the marketplace. There amidst the morning murmur he finds others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. "You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right," he says to them. Three hours of the day were already wasted and who knows how many more would have been, had the landowner not come along. They don't need to be told their pay. Beggars can't be choosers. They trust the landowner's words: He will treat them fairly.

The landowner goes out again at noon, the sixth hour, and yet again at three p.m., the ninth hour. Both times he hires more workers.

One hour before quitting time, five p.m., the eleventh hour, the landowner goes out once more. His desire for workers in his vineyard is strong; there is always more work to be done in his vineyard. Sure enough, though the buzz of the marketplace has died down, he finds others standing around. "Why have you stood here all day unemployed?" he asks.

The men hang their heads. They have carried the guilt and shame of their idleness, of their meaningless lives, all day long. "No one has hired us," they say.

"You also go into the vineyard."

The joy on their faces is evident. The landowner doesn't even have to tell them that he will pay them. They are just happy to have the entire day not go to waste. They get to work for a landowner who cares enough about them to make them useful.

An hour later the owner summons his foreman. "Call in all the workers and pay them before the sun sets. They are counting on the wages that I give them." He then adds, "Start with the last ones and work your way to those hired first." The foreman nods.

Outside the workers line up against a golden horizon to receive their pay. As the ones hired first wipe the sweat off their foreheads, they see the foreman give a denarius to those hired last. "He agreed to pay *us* a denarius," they think. "Surely now he'll give us more." But as the ninth hour group, the sixth hour group, and the third hour group all receive a denarius, their faces begin to cloud. They step up to the foreman and hold out their hand. They also receive one denarius. Even they.

"What?" they say, looking at the landowner. "That's what you gave them! These men who were hired last worked only one hour. Look, our muscles are sore and our shirts are soaked from our backbreaking work all day, and under a hot sun, and you are making these men our equals."

The landowner frowns as he listens to the first ones grumble. He stops one of them. "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. You received the benefit of being hired at the beginning of the day. You yourself agreed with me to work for an acceptable pay. You would still be standing around idle and useless, returning to your family with nothing, had I not hired you. Take what is yours and move along! It was my good will to give to those hired last as I gave to you. Or am I not permitted to carry out my will with what belongs to me? Or are you envious and spiteful because I am good and generous?" Literally, Jesus says something like, "Or are you giving me the stink-eye because I am generous?"

"So," Jesus concluded, "this is how the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Peter and the other disciples had to recognize that they were the first ones in the parable. They were among the first to follow Christ, both as hearers of his Word and as teachers and preachers of his Word. They would be among the first members and the first ministers of the New Testament church. They had endured and certainly would endure the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

But Peter and the other disciples thought they should be entitled to more on the basis of that work. And what did the landowner tell the workers in his vineyard who thought that way? "Take what is yours and get!" Jesus was saying loud and clear, "Watch out, Peter! Watch out, all of you! To leverage the work you do in my kingdom against my generosity is to scorn God's grace, to scorn my work. And do not cry, 'Unfair!' Remember your natural condition. Remember the state in which I found you and called you. You would still be idle and useless if I treated you fairly, as you really deserve."

Brothers and sisters, have any of you grown up in a Lutheran family? Were you baptized just one or a few days after you were born? Have any of you been lifelong Christians? Served for many years as a councilman or elder or Sunday School or Vacation Bible School teacher? This parable is a strong warning to you and to me. We compare well to the first ones in this parable.

Those of you who are relatively recent converts to Christianity, and you children who are still becoming acquainted with the truths of God's Word at home and here, the gospel may be stunningly fresh to you now, as it was for those hired last, but Satan will work to poison your unpolluted joy. This parable is a strong warning also to you.

Jesus is sternly warning all of us, because we all have a sinful nature that thinks we are entitled to more from God than we deserve:

"Mr. X spent his entire life away from church and living in sin, right up until the end when he was converted. Why should God reward him and me equally?"

"It's really not all that surprising that God called me into his kingdom. I'm just the kind of person with the right kind of skills that he needs."

"God, if you're going to deal with me only in your grace, then what's the point? Why then should I do the work, endure the ridicule, bear the hardships?"

"Are you giving me the stink-eye because I am generous?"

How quick we are to think we are entitled to more and to begrudge what God gives others, forgetting what we deserve, forgetting what we were before God called us. We forget that our lives were meaningless without God, with no hope for the future, imprisoned by the confines of our birth date and our death. We forget that in God's eyes, and so in reality, we were doing nothing. We may have been straining and striving our heart out, but for what? Relaxation now and then? Retirement? Creature comforts? Praise from men? Those things all have their end.

The burden of the day and the burning of the sun that the first ones in the parable endured is nothing compared to the burden of guilt that we deserve to take with us into eternal burning.

2.

Why were the last workers so happy at the end of the day? You might say it was because they got a lot of money for not a lot of work, and that's true. But why did that make them happy? It made them happy because they realized it was way more than they deserved.

"So the last will be first and the first will be last."

How can we who have been hired in the earlier hours of the day, so to speak, have that same perspective? How can we make sure that God's grace always remains fresh for us?

First, we can remember that we deserve the same as everyone else, as we just talked about. We can remember that we are by nature sinful and deserving of hell. While we were doing nothing, the landowner was doing something. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Second, we can stop viewing the later workers with envy. Did you notice what the vineyard owner said to those he hired at the eleventh hour? "Why have you stood here *all day* unemployed?" In other words, it's not like they weren't there when he came at all the other times. He just didn't hire them then. But he did hire you.

Or would you rather he hadn't? Would you rather have taken your chances with a life of sin? Would you rather your life was filled with nothing useful, with meaningless, empty pleasures? Would you rather Jesus waited as long as possible to find you? Would you rather take your chances with hell? Is work in his vineyard that burdensome and boring? Does it have that few benefits?

Indeed, it has infinite benefits! And that is the third thing to remember: Remember your pay. The people hired first were fine with going into the vineyard at dawn, because the pay was good and right. They only began to despise it when others got the same. So remember that the pay is good—forgiveness of sins every hour? Protection and provision every hour? Prayers heard and answered every time? Being treated with undeserved honor and respect by the almighty and holy God? The hope of eternal life and bliss? These are tremendous benefits, aren't they?

See your Father's gracious will. See his desire to get people into his vineyard. He keeps going out, keeps inviting. He *wants* to give to the man who was hired last just as he wants to give to the man who was hired first! He wants to give to us all! He wants to give to us all because his Son died for all. Because his Son Jesus spent sweat and blood that mattered, sweat and blood that actually did earn something in God's eyes. The only wages we deserved was death, but Jesus earned eternal life for us all, so that God freely gives it to us all as a gift.

Yes, friends, if we only focus on being first, then Jesus's words will and should terrify us: "The first will be last." But when we realize that, even when we are first, we are last, then we

will take comfort in Jesus's words: "The last shall be first!" And so let us, like those hired last in the parable, quietly stare with wondering eyes at all of the blessings temporal and eternal placed into our hands. "We too, Lord?"

And let us see him look at the work scars in the hands of his only Son and smile at us: "Yes, my son, my daughter, even you." Amen.