

16 S. after Pentecost 9/20/20
Matthew 20:1-16 20A

NOW WHEN THOSE HIRED FIRST CAME, THEY THOUGHT THEY WOULD RECEIVE MORE, BUT EACH OF THEM ALSO RECEIVED A DENARIUS. AND ON RECEIVING IT THEY GRUMBLED AT THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE, SAYING, 'THESE LAST WORKED ONLY ONE HOUR, AND YOU HAVE MADE THEM EQUAL TO US WHO HAVE BORNE THE BURDEN OF THE DAY AND THE SCORCHING HEAT.'

Rev. Henry Gerecke was a farm boy from Missouri, who grew up to be an LCMS pastor. When WW II broke out, he joined the Army Chaplain's Corps. Being fluent in German, he found himself with a most interesting congregation -- he was assigned to be the chaplain to the Nazi officers who were on trial for crimes against humanity at Nuremberg. Eventually, eleven members of Hitler's inner circle confessed their faith in Jesus as Savior. Eight of them received instruction and were able to take the Lord's Supper from Gerecke's hand.

Eventually, ten members of his prison flock were sentenced to death. The first to face the gallows was Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop. An American officer asked for his last words. Ribbentrop responded: "I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. May God have mercy on my soul." Then he turned to Gerecke and said, "I'll see you again." Moments later, the trap door opened beneath his feet and he breathed his last. Other members of the flock died in like manner.

An interesting footnote to this story is that Chaplain Henry Gerecke received a lot of mail. Some of the letters gave thanks to Almighty God for enabling the Gospel to reach even into the hearts of Nazi war criminals. Other letters condemned Gerecke, several going so far as saying he should be hanged with the war criminals for doing what he did.

The people who wrote those letters condemning Chaplain Gereke for sharing the Gospel with Nazi war criminals were, in fact, condemning themselves. What they were in essence saying was that when Jesus died on the cross, He really did not die for all sin. They were in essence saying that the blood of Jesus does not cleanse us from all sin. And, if Jesus didn't die for all sin and His blood does not cleanse from all sin, how do you know Jesus died for your sins? How do you know you are forgiven your sins?

This is exactly what Jesus is warning against in our parable this morning. Look at His words, *“Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius (v. 10).”* Those who were hired first thought they would receive more wages than those hired last. When they received the same wages, notice their reaction. They do not rejoice in their neighbor's fortune. They do not praise the landowner for his generosity. *“And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the scorching heat’ (vv. 11-12).”*

That is the sentiment of the letter writers who wrote to Chaplain Gereke, condemning him for sharing the Gospel with Nazi war criminals. And that is the same thinking that fills us in the death of our sin.

- If I have more money, I'm a better person than my neighbor.
- If my kids don't get in trouble and are star athletes, that means I'm a better parent than, well, you know who...
- If I don't have trouble in my marriage, it means I'm a better Christian than, well, you know who...

- If I don't suffer illness or if tragedy does not strike my family, it means God loves me more than, well, you know who...

It's fun to compare ourselves to our neighbor, isn't it? Why is it fun to compare ourselves to our neighbor? We win! We win, every time, because we make the rules; we set the standard; we meet our expectations.

In the parable, the workers hired early in the morning were offended by the grace and goodness of the landowner. They thought they were entitled to more. In that same way, just like those hired early in the morning in the parable and those who wrote letters condemning Chaplain Gereke, we are offended by the grace and goodness of God. The workers got themselves in trouble when they compared themselves with the other workers. And, we get ourselves into trouble when we compare ourselves to our neighbors.

The point of our parable is this: Jesus wants us to examine ourselves. Do you really think of yourself as being better than your neighbor? Do you truly believe that your sin is not as great and as grievous as your neighbor's? Do you actually expect special status with God and His extra favor because you have done more or that your sins are not as bad as your neighbor's?

My Dear Friends in Christ, we need to be constantly reminded that the Bible teaches that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own. We would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation.

The Good News for all sinners is that God so loved us that he sent Jesus, who was born of virgin mother to bear the burden of us all and pay the only wages that we truly have earned and deserved, that is, the wages

of sin, which is death. Early in the morning He was hauled before Pilate; from the 3rd hour until the 6th hour He suffered in our place upon the Cross; from the 6th hour until the 9th hour, the darkness of God's judgment against sinful humanity covered His creation as all His wrath against sin was poured out on His only-begotten Son. At the 9th hour, he cried, "Eli Eli, lema sabachthani?"... and yielded up His spirit (Mt 27:46, 50). At the 11th hour He was buried in the tomb, from which He rose to life again the 3rd day to bring life and immortality to light for us poor sinners.

St. John writes these beautiful words in his first letter, "He is the propitiation – the atoning sacrifice -- for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn 2:2)." In His parable, Jesus teaches us that people enter the kingdom at all times of life. Some receive baptism as infants, "early in the morning," we could say. Others enter at the third hour as older children ... the sixth hour as young adults ... the ninth hour as they approach retirement ... at the eleventh hour on their deathbed. Christ died for all, so those who come to faith at any hour of life all receive the same pay ... eternal life with Christ.

Which is why we follow in the life and footsteps of Chaplain Henry Gerecke. Nothing happens by chance in God's creation -- that means in his life, and in your life, Dear Child of God. When God sent His Son to atone for the sin of the world, that meant He even atoned for the sin of Nazi war criminals and God wanted them to hear the saving Gospel. So, he raised up a Missouri farm kid, fluent in German, trained in theology, to bring that everlasting Gospel to Nuremberg. God, in His infinite mercy, brought those Nazi war criminals into Chaplain Gerecke's life.

And, God, in His infinite mercy, brings people into your life every day so that you can share with them the everlasting Gospel. God did His work

in Henry Gerecke, so He could do His work through him. God does His work in you, calling you to be His child in Baptism, and, through the Means of Grace, gives you faith so that you may follow Him. Like He did with Chaplain Gerecke, God will use your words, your hands, your feet, your checkbook, your life to bring others to Jesus. Which is why we pray this day, "...since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.