

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week we heard one of the most infamous of parables, known as the workers in the vineyard. What makes this parable so infamous is that it angers so many when it is heard because we view it as unfair. The workers who have worked all day in the hot sun get paid the same amount as those who were hired at the end of the day and only worked a few hours, if even that. At the end of the day, all the workers get paid a day's wage and we see this as just simply, unfair. But that's how we read this parable. Nonetheless, as Jesus begins teaching the parable he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like..."

With that said, we understand this to mean that Jesus is teaching us how God works in the kingdom and not so much how we feel about it. However, as unfair as this parable is, what I believe angers us the most about this parable and makes us cry foul, is that, when viewed in the context of God's kingdom, we assume that we are the first hired and we feel cheated. We feel cheated because someone is getting something we say they do not deserve despite the fact that God is the one giving it. Our anger is brought about by our measure of fairness with a total disregard for God's grace and fairness.

Parables teach us about the kingdom of God and they challenge some of our most cherished assumptions about the nature of God and God's kingdom. We tend to assume that we are insiders and that others, of whom we do not approve, are outsiders, or in the case of this parable of the workers in the vineyard, we assume we are the one's hired at the start of the day. Jesus' gracious, wide-open invitation to his kingdom can be a challenge to our measure of fairness along with the imagination and self-image of those of us who assume insider status in the kingdom of God.¹

And once again today we may find ourselves very disappointed that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are heading into the kingdom ahead of us who are here in the church just like the chief priests and elders. Rather, "those people," those sinners who were hired at the end of the day are ahead of us and getting the same as us. We either say it's unfair or we say it just aint so...we were hired first, we deserve more, we deserve our front row seat ahead of those sinners. Here lies the problem with parables, or I should say, here is why we might not be so found of parables because we attempt to parse them out in our favor. In other words, we tend to treat parables as a puzzle or an instructional guide for us to figure out our standing in God's kingdom. However, when we try to do this, we miss the intent of the parable and we end up with the chief priests and elders being told that the tax collectors and prostitutes are at the front of the line and we are not.

Today in the Gospel lesson we find Jesus in Jerusalem confronting the chief priests and elders, the most powerful Jews in all Judea. I mention that Jesus is in Jerusalem because his very presence in Jerusalem signifies His public claim as the promised Messiah and King which undermines the authority of the chief priests and elders. And of course, we hear that the chief priests and elders feel the threat of Jesus and his presence to their authority because they question Jesus about *his* authority and where it comes from. By questioning the authority of Jesus, they are only undermining their very own authority.

¹ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 39, No. 3. Year A, July, August, September 2011. Logos Productions Inc., Inver Grove Heights, MN. Page 53.

The chief priests and elders are the powerful religious and community leaders of Jerusalem. The Chief Priests are the high-ranking members of the Jewish priestly class, from the family of the High Priest and the tribe of Levi. They manage the temple's daily operations, sacrifices, and religious services. The elders are the wealthy family or clan leaders, tribal representatives, and prominent community figures known for their age, wisdom, and experience. These two groups are not only viewed as the faithful, religiously active, and spiritually devout followers of God's law, they are also the religious and civil authority of Jerusalem...and according to their assumed self-righteous standings, in the eyes of the community that surrounds them, there is no question about their standing in God's kingdom. However, their authority comes from the people and from their heritage or ancestry. Whereas, the authority of Jesus comes from God, but they do not see it that way. To not see this or to misunderstand this by these two authoritative groups is to deny the very thing the priests and elders represent themselves. In essence, to question the authority of Jesus is to question the very thing that undergirds not only their authority but the very thing that makes them who they are and conveys their standing in the culture. Of course, Jesus sees this and turns their challenge right back on them by challenging them with a parable.

In this parable Jesus asks the chief priests and elders which of the two sons asked to work in their father's vineyard did the will of the father? Was it the first son who told his father he would not work in the vineyard but later changed his mind and went? Was it the second son who told his father that he would go and never went? Jesus wants to know which of the two did the will of the father? The chief priests and the elders like us attempt to figure out which son was the "good" son and went and worked in the vineyard without even considering what I believe Jesus was really questioning. With the chief priests and elders questioning the authority of Jesus and then attempting to answer Jesus correctly, it only shows that they do not have a clue as to what Jesus is really asking.

Today this parable causes us to attempt to figure out which son is the correct answer. And as we attempt to figure out which son is correct, it only shows that we also like the chief priests and elders want to choose the correct answer so we can assume our "prize" for answering correctly. Again, we make the parables about ourselves instead of asking ourselves the question Jesus is really asking and that is...what is the will of the Father? So, I ask now, what is the will of the Father? It is something we all hear time and time again but can we really articulate the will of the Father or even put it into action? Saint John's account of the will of the Father says this:

³⁵ Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; ³⁸ for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.' (John 6:35-40)

That all those who see the Son and believe in Him may have eternal life...we may say we believe in Jesus Christ, we may say we have faith in Jesus Christ, but we are still trying to figure out the question about the sons and not the will of the Father. We are not the deciding factor of who's in and who is out simply because we have answered correctly...that is out of our hands and totally in

the very bloody and very capable hands of Jesus Christ. Listen to how Luther sees the will of the Father and explains faith:

Faith is not what some people think it is. Their human dream is a delusion. Because they observe that faith is not followed by good works or a better life, they fall into error, even though they speak and hear much about faith. "Faith is not enough," they say, "You must do good works, you must be pious to be saved." They think that, when you hear the gospel, you start working, creating by your own strength a thankful heart which says, "I believe." That is what they think true faith is. But, because this is a human idea, a dream, the heart never learns anything from it, so it does nothing and reform doesn't come from this 'faith,' either. Instead, faith is God's work in us, that changes us and gives new birth from God. (John 1:13). It kills the Old Adam and makes us completely different people. It changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts and all our powers. It brings the Holy Spirit with it. Yes, it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing.²

The will of the Father is not about answering a question correctly...it's not about which son is the correct answer. The will of the Father is the very faith that has been given to us that enables us to see that God's Kingdom is here before us in Word and Sacrament. Through the faith that has been poured into us, we trust that God's Kingdom comes through the final revelation of God and not by our merits.³

Faith, as Luther further explains, is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. It is the assurance of things hoped for, faith is the conviction of things not seen.⁴ Faith is the work we do in the world that reveals the very presence of God's grace and mercy. Which "son" did the will of the Father? Neither did because the work should have been done without asking, however, both are called the Father's sons just as we are all called children of God through a faith in the promise that says we shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.

The gospel is not confined to this place or our understanding of who is worthy or who's in or who is out. Let's not forget that the Gospel is heard and recognized in the lives of people whom the righteous seem to despise. These are people who make no claims of being righteous or religious, but who carry on daily tasks given them by God. Luther said a mother changing a diaper is just as righteous as the work of the pope. When people do not try to be religious, but simply do the will of God without even fully knowing or understanding, they respond to God's call. That can include anyone who hears the parable within the church, and it may include those who do not. God's dominion takes place and gets done beyond the human bounds of church and religious activity in many corners of the world, even where the gospel has not been heard.

² An excerpt from "An Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans," Luther's German Bible of 1522 by Martin Luther, 1483-1546. Translated by Rev. Robert E. Smith from DR. MARTIN LUTHER'S VERMISCHTE DEUTSCHE SCHRIFTEN. Johann K. Irmischer, ed. Vol. 63 Erlangen: Heyder and Zimmer, 1854), pp.124-125. [EA 63:124-125]

³ Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000. The Second Petition The Large Catechism: Of Prayer, art. ii, par. 53 447.

⁴ Hebrews 11:1

The good news is there are no insiders or outsiders, in the Kingdom of God, the tax collectors and the prostitutes enter the kingdom before the chief priests and elders but all through the mercy of God, enter the kingdom of heaven. The will of the Father is not death, but that we may turn to him and live! This is indeed the will of the Father.

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