

Rat Races and Totem Poles

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Hymn: "Salvation unto Us Has Come" (*LSB* 555)

"The kingdom of heaven is like..." In other words, this is what things look like when God is in charge, when Jesus reigns, runs the show, runs *us*. "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Jesus loved this phrase. When you are fueled by the same fuel, when your sails are filled with the same Spirit that proceeds from the Father and the Son, this is how things go. The kingdom of heaven.

It's what we pray for every time we say those words in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom." "Come, God, to us and make things look like that." And the parables that start off this way are, as it were, Jesus giving virtual tours of the kingdom.

Just a few chapters before this, Jesus' tour of the kingdom shows us a place where people cease to ask, "Who is the greatest?" because they know whose they are¹; and on another tour a place where everyone stinks at math and is even worse at keeping track of each other's sins²; and now in chapter 20 another kingdom of heaven story and it is a mind-blower. The master of a house owns a vineyard...

During my years at seminary in St. Louis, a fun way to spend a Saturday, especially in the late Spring and summer, was to drive out with a bunch of friends about an hour or so west to the wine country and tour a vineyard. And naturally we'd wonder aloud, "How'd fun it to be to own a vineyard," though what we were really saying was, "Wouldn't it be fun to sit around all day in a beautiful place drinking free wine?"

¹ Parable of the Lost Sheep, Matthew 18:1-20

² Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Matthew 18:21-35

But we knew deep down that that wasn't what running a vineyard was all about. It was actually hard work, which is why the master of the vineyard in Jesus' story is out early, at the crack of dawn, 6:00 a.m., hiring workers. These people must have been the go-getters. They're out there early. And he and they shake on the going day's rate for an honest day's work—a denarius.

But it's hard work. So, the master goes out again at noon and at three o'clock, hiring more and more workers. Maybe more of a gentleman's agreement at this point as to what they'll be compensated, but it'll be adequate. Oddly enough, at the eleventh hour (6 p.m, perhaps?), he goes out again! Some folks who have less than an hour of daylight and by the time they get there, they're going to have what, fifteen, thirty minutes of actual work? They'll hardly break a sweat. But he hires them, too.

And then the whistle blows. It's payroll time. And the guys who came at the eleventh hour get paid first. They open their pay envelopes...a full denarius! Holy cow! Lucky them! There must have been lots of smiles around. Lucky you, good for you! everyone said, even those who had been there the whole day. But they were also saying to themselves, "Whoa! If those guys got a full denarius, we are really going to score!"

And what do they find when they get their pay envelopes? Exactly what they shook on at 6 a.m. And the grumbling ensues: "You've been drinking too much of that free wine there, master? What is this about?" Read verse 12: "These last worked only one hour, and and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." A real mind-blower.

“Thy kingdom come.” But if it looks like that, I’m not sure I want it to come too soon. And the reason I say that is, like the all-dayers in the story, you and I spend a lot of time and effort working hard to ensure *they* are not made *equal to us*. Now I know we are all good Americans. We’re all about “All men are created equal” and so forth. But we are even more about making sure we join the bigger, faster, stronger, smarter, richer, prettier rat race and climb our way to the top of the totem pole and, once there, make sure things don’t stay equal. And if you happen to be someone who’s gotten a little ahead in the race, higher on the totem pole, maybe even got a little bit sweaty in the process, at the end of the day every one getting the same trophy is going to rub you the wrong way. It’s going to have you grumbling. What the heck is that all about?

What the heck that is all about is the kingdom of God. The grace of God. And if you don’t like it, well, get over it. That’s grace. It’s how grace works. And there’s no two ways about it. It’s offensive. There’s plenty to stumble over in the Christian faith, but nothing more scandalous, especially to the totem-polers, than this great leveler, grace. Nothing more offensive to the bigger, faster, stronger, smarter, richer, prettier, holier rat-race runners, obsessed with trophies and paychecks and the envy of social media followers with the blister, sweat rings and the hypertension to prove it, nothing more likely to wring out of us a “What the heck is that all about?” than some drunk vintner making the last minute scabs equal to us.

You know, one of the previous times I preached on this text, I retold the parable and embellished a bit and made a point to describe the latecomers, the ones the vineyard owner hires at the eleventh hour as good-for-nothings living at the local bar, covered in leather and pierced body parts. But I brought it all together at the end by

saying that what matters is that we all receive God's grace which none of us deserves, whether we're an eleventh hour slacker or a respectable, hard-working early riser. At the end of the day, the denarius of salvation is for the whole world.

Which is all true. But the more I think about it, why did I so readily make those late hires losers? There could be other, very plausible explanations. Jesus doesn't say anything about them being losers. For example, instead of drinking the day away, the reason the one guy did not get hired until the last minute was that he spent the entire afternoon teaching his neighbor, who lost his parents and lives with his grandparents, how to ride his bike. Maybe that was more important than making a buck. Or maybe another one of those last-minute hires came out not because she was some lazy barfly but because she suffered from stifling depression and the fact that she got out of bed at all, even the eleventh hour, took more strength and willpower than it did any of those all-day-in-the-field guys.

Why do you think when I ponder this parable I so quickly go to those loser explanations than those more charitable but equally plausible ones? I think it's easy. It's because while paying lip service to grace, sticking in those loser explanations, which you may do in your mind, too, allows me to hold on a little bit to the some-are-more-deserving-than-others totem pole. We all need grace, but some, the drunk losers, need more grace than others, the early birds with whom I associate myself.

And even if they all get paid the same in the end, we all know they're not really equal. Think of some elite school or college and there's a bunch of guys, one of whom happens to have a father whose name is on one of the buildings at the school. You can imagine them getting together and saying, "We're all here. We're all equal, I guess. But

let's be clear. *We* are here because we earned it. *You* are here because your daddy wrote a check."

And now I'm not just filling in the gaps in Jesus' story. I'm pretty sure that's how we view and treat each other. "Yes, I'm a Christian. I know I need forgiveness, but there's no pretending that I need nearly as much as those losers over there—husband, wife, children, parents, co-worker, political foe, *loser* over there. I'll tip my hat to grace, because that's what Jesus would have me do, but I'm going to keep the totem pole.

And yet, "Thy kingdom come," we pray. There's still something about it, as much as I keep asking, "Who is the greatest?" and as much as you keep honing your accounting skills and keep track of others' sins, as much as we all work up a good sweat making sure some are more equal than others, there's something alluring about these pictures of the kingdom that Jesus keeps pouring over us.

They convict us, that's for sure. My life doesn't look like that. I was trying to think of an image of wanting to do something—something we see others do and pulling it off and enjoying it—but finding it too hard. And what came to mind were those ice-breaker trust games. You know that thing where you're supposed to put your arms out and close your eyes and just fall back into the arms of the people behind you? I cannot do those. Maybe I've seen too many YouTube videos of people falling flat on their back. Too scary. No thanks. Kind of want to. Wish I could. But can't.

That's how these parables make us feel sometimes. You want to be out there. You want to be in that kingdom that Jesus is describing. But you just can't bring yourself to do it. Wouldn't it be something simply not to care who gets what and actually just be happy, genuinely happy, to see the latecomer—and who cares why he's late—

catch a break? There's something beautiful about that, even freeing. I know it's hard to imagine. But imagine if that were our world. My world. Your world.

As practice, we might think of retelling some of those Bible stories we know so well in terms of working according to the kingdom-of-heaven logic. Go back to the beginning (nearly the beginning), think Cain and Abel. Abel when he gets that attaboy from God and big Cain, firstborn Can, hard worker Cain, follows-in-the-father's business Cain, used to getting all the accolades, child of promise, instead of launching into homicidal rage, imagine if he had come to his brother and said, "Man! Way to go there, little brother! I'm so happy for you."

Or instead of trying to kill them, imagine the yet childless Sarah filled with joy to see Hagar and little Ishmael bouncing on her lap. Think of Jacob's wives, not a whiff of jealousy, throwing baby showers for one another. Or when ten of those sons are all grown up, instead of throwing him into a hole, saying to the eleventh, "Man, all those colors! That jacket is the coolest!" Instead of grumbling, think of Aaron and Miriam so proud to see their little brother, lisping Moses taking charge.

Hard to imagine, isn't it? Almost silly. A world without your jealousies, without your up here and your down there, instead of a "What the heck is that?" the good fortune of another elicits a "Thanks be to God!"

It's hard to imagine letting all that go. Rat races and totem poles and all. Still, here we are, being enchanted by the vision of this other way, this other reign, week after week courted by the master Storyteller who lives the stories he tells. Jesus is the vineyard owner. And in the story He lives, the early hires don't just grumble at His grace, they string Him up. They fashion a couple of those totem poles into a cross and

kill him. Jesus dies on our totem poles. And then He rises up with the same grace on his lips that He described in this parable and sends out ambassadors of his kingdom to live and tell the same grace-filled stories that He told and lived.

A lot of us want to let go of the rivalries, let go of caring about who gets what, let go and just fall into the kingdom Jesus describes and lives. We want to but find it really hard to. Maybe this will help: The arms you are falling into are the arms of your Savior, once spread for you on the Cross. Falling into His arms, you fall into a kingdom of a great vintner who has wine for everyone. You fall into the arms of the One who regardless of who you are or who you aren't, of where you've been or haven't been, of how long you've worked or how long you haven't, has the very best wine, the kind that gladdens the saddest and calms the most hypertensive hearts and the best bread, too, living bread that satisfies hungers you didn't even know you had.

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

Pastor Brent McGuire
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church