

## *‘Love’s Labor Lost’*

*Psalms 30; Matthew 20:1-16*

July 3, 2022

Imagine right now there’s something of amazing value and it’s LOST. Imagine that perhaps this item is so small it could even be wedged under the cushions of your couch lingering between a quarter and a stale tortilla chip. There it is – a lottery ticket you purchased months ago, long-since forgotten. And this isn’t just any scrap of paper. It’s a WINNING lottery ticket. Now imagine for a moment you rush home, tear apart your house looking for it. Lo and behold, you find it! What would you do first? My guess is one of the first things you’d do is you’d call the North Carolina lottery office. “I’ve found a winning ticket” you’d say. You’d provide the numbers, give the date and location of purchase. Relief building upon excitement building upon dream. But then the words would come like a thundering blow. “I’m sorry, Mr./Mrs. So-and-so, that ticket expired yesterday. You’re too late to be awarded the prize.” All of your dreams evaporate like wisps of smoke blown by the wind hearing the words. Instead of millions, all you’re left with is the depressing realization that you were too late.

I’m afraid some of us live our lives believing that we stand immutably in the state of too late. “If only I’ve stayed in college.” “If only I’d applied for that job.” “If only I’d listened to my mother.” All of these “if only” statements head in one direction. What we believe is that “if only” we’d have done whatever it was we didn’t actually do, then our life would be happy, joyous and free. It’s a recipe for remorse in which “It’s too late” becomes the life-draining mantra of our days. With this outlook, God’s grace is as unintelligible as a sentence in Sanskrit. After all, to the “too later,” grace is something they failed to earn by not coming to church or not praying enough or living dissolute lives or any host of reasons. You see, when it comes to grace, as with so many things in their lives, “too later” believe themselves to be even too late for God.

But hey, that might not be you. People are different after all. And the parable we’ve just heard from the Gospel of Matthew shines upon us all in different ways. Some of us here this morning, are, undoubtedly, early birds. They’re the ones who just naturally seize the day. They’re the kind of people who arrive ahead of time to get the best seat in the house. They see a good deal and they immediately jump on board. Unfortunately, a lot of folks in this category are beset by a similar problem of their own when it comes to comprehending grace. Too often early-birds look at life through lenses which cast grace not so much as a generous gift of God but rather they see it as a personal achievement. And believing themselves to have chosen rightly, there’s oftentimes a hardness of heart when it comes to thinking about other people. They think “those people who didn’t act as wisely as us with respect to God, well, they made their bed, now they’ve got to lie in it!”

And so oftentimes the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is as foreign to these early-birds as it is to the too-laters. Each believes it’s something you earn although they believe they stand on differing sides of the equation. So, whether you’re a too later, believing the opportunity for grace has passed you by or whether you’re an early bird, confident you’ve made the right choices to EARN God’s Grace, there’s good news for all of us in today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus, in talking about the Kingdom tells a parable of laborers in the vineyard.

Now I’m sure a lot of you are thinking this parable would be a horrible way to run a business so you just reject it. To you let me just say this – the parable of the laborers in the vineyard isn’t the best way to run a business. It’s a parable and as Tom Long explains it “the purpose of a parable isn’t to provide practical management skills. The aim of a parable is to be monumentally IMPRACTICAL. To so thoroughly fracture our expectations that we’re forced to think new thoughts about ourselves, about others and about God. So, keep it in those terms and this parable will shine brightly on you, I promise! Talking to a group of people, some “too later” and a great many “early birds,” Jesus says “*that the Kingdom of God is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*”

Now look, it being an introduction, we’re bound to skip over these words as though they were the Biblical equivalent of “once upon a time” and leave it at that. But the parable subverts our expectations IMMEDIATELY. Consider this – would you expect Bill Gates to personally take it upon himself to hire the people boxing his software? Of course not, he’d be too busy, right?

But the landowner isn’t too busy. He doesn’t send out some low-level functionary to do this job. He does it himself. What seems to be an entry point into the parable already radiates with the generous love of God. It

teaches us that God is never too busy to get personally involved. The parable begins at the crack of dawn when the landowner encounters a group of men decked out in their finest work clothes. You can just imagine them, can't you? Spiffy, pressed overalls. They hold pails that have been polished so well they sparkle brightly even in the faint sunlight of daybreak. They're early birds, God bless them. They're itching and ready to begin. And so, they're hired, agreeing to a good, daily wage. Accepting the deal, off they go into the vineyard with the happy knowledge they'll be taken care of. A few hours pass and the landowner's still on the lookout when he comes across another group of willing laborers. Now maybe this group, well, their overalls are clean but they're not pressed. And while they carry work pails that shine, they don't sparkle with the same luster the early birds had. "Head out into the vineyard" says the landowner. "I'll pay you what's fair" he says. So off they go, into the vineyard to work right there alongside the early birds. The same scene repeats itself twice more. Once at noon. Then again at three o'clock. Each subsequent group of laborers looking slightly shoddier than the previous one. By five o'clock, with the heat of the day easing into the cool of twilight, the landowner sets out YET AGAIN. He finds others just standing around. But this group doesn't even have overalls. Rather they wear tatters of cloth frayed so badly as to only vaguely resemble clothes. As to pails, they haven't got any. Looking at them, it's no wonder this group isn't working! Who knows, maybe they're even passing around a bottle of cheap wine sharing stories with one another of having been "a day late and a dollar short" their entire lives.

The landowner comes with concern asking - "Why are you standing here idle all day?" To which they reply - "Because no one has hired us." You can just hear the heartache in their words. They're the kids left on the playing field unpicked by any team. They're the people hanging around outside the employment office hoping against the odds to find work. They're the alcoholics and the addicts. They're the ones with withered dreams and unfulfilled aspirations. You see, at five o'clock there's not even a shred of optimism for them to hang on in a world which rewards the early bird and leaves the too late behind. So 5 o'clock is a cruel time. It's a time when hope has long since evaporated and despair clings to their bodies more closely than their clothes ever did. A normal employer might look at them, shake their head and say "you're too late." Maybe a more compassionate one would say "I wish I could use you but, we're full up right now. You know how the economy is." Either way, most normal employers would leave the "too late" without much but empty words and elusive promises.

Thanks be to God the landowner is Jesus and Jesus isn't like you or me or any other kind of employer under the sun. And so, His words cut through the thick fog of the "too late" despair. He says simply - "*you also go into the vineyard.*" Where there wasn't even the slightest hope for employment now comes life-sustaining work. Sure, they think, they won't get paid very much. After all, it's five o'clock. There's barely an hour in the work day. But into the fields they go with gratitude. It's like getting the last seat on an airplane when you're flying standby. Even though it's a middle seat where you're squeezed between two other people and there's a crying baby behind you and a recliner in front of you, having any seat, any seat at all beats the alternative. And then, come six o'clock, the whistle blows and the workday ends. All the laborers, from the early birds to the "too late," trudge in from the vineyard. Some more muddied than others. Some, with noticeably more sweat dripping from their brows. Then the owner of the vineyard says to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Everyone was paid the same. The first out receives the same as the last out. In other words, those flying standby get the same first-class seats as the people who booked early and arrived at the airport with ample time to clear security. What it means is incredible! What it means, in a nutshell, is that you can never BE too late to experience the unquantifiable grace of God.

For those of you who feel that life has passed you by and some days you imagine yourself little more than a hardened shell of remorse and regret - hear the good news of the Gospel. You're NEVER too late to enjoy the grace of our Lord. If seemingly He hasn't hired you yet, rest assured, He is coming. For God will always come. Jesus will extend His hand so that you'll be provided sufficient grace to last you the remainder of your life and into eternity. In Jesus Christ, you're not given the scraps off the table, you're given the whole enchilada. It's a great deal. In fact, it's such a good deal for the "too late", it upsets the status quo. Scandal erupts within the ranks of the early birds. There's grumbling and grouching. Can't you just hear their questions-

“Why in the world are they entitled? How can they possibly get as much as I do?” You feel for these people, you really do. Who hasn’t been slightly miffed at the concept of grace on a particularly hard-hearted day? Who hasn’t questioned the wisdom of God to wrap 11th hour adherents in the same grace early-birds receive? But what the landowner says in response to their complaints this “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

And that’s it. There’s the good news for both the too laters and the early birds. Grace isn’t about the workers at all. It’s about the employer! And God is generous. Generous beyond the bounds of our comprehension. He forgives our sins and restores us into the fullness of His fellowship early bird and too later alike. By His abundant, overflowing grace, all who believe are provided for even though NONE of us are ever remotely worthy of it. Grace isn’t extended because of what we DO, grace is given for no other reason than the generosity of the landowner!

And when you think about it, when grace really clicks in our minds, it upends the way we treat everyone. Paul tells us in Romans, all who confess with their lips and believe with their hearts that Jesus is Lord will be saved. With any other commodity under the sun, it should make us mad that those who’re picked late get the same deal we get who’ve been confessing and believing for years. Ah but you see with something as sweet as the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, it’s so good it softens our hearts and we just rejoice that others get to partake of it as well. It’s like being able to share the pecan praline pound cake from Morgan’s with a friend who’s never tried it. I can tell you from experience, that when you share it with someone who’s never tasted it before, your own enjoyment is wonderfully amplified. That you yourself get a piece is good. That others get to taste it for the first time and you get to see their joy makes even the mouthful you’ve got taste even more delicious!

Friends, make NO mistake about it, when you’ve truly received the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, then you desire nothing more than to see others share in its comfort! If you’re more about exclusion than inclusion when it comes to grace, then hear this – the chances are you may not yet fully understand it well enough to be actually be enjoying its fullness.

I’m reminded here of two stories about churches. One I heard at a Presbytery meeting a few years ago. The other, I heard from my friend. My friend told a story of his church. One Sunday morning, one of their members arrived for worship with three young women. All wearing dirty clothes, all a little uncouth. They were a bit loud, they fumbled their way through the order of worship. But it makes sense when you hear their story. These young women’s mother is an addict and had been most of their lives. Amazingly though, these three young women kept showing up at my friend’s church, week after week. Then one day, my friend announces from the pulpit that sign-ups are outside the sanctuary for the next “Ladies Supper.” The eldest daughter of this trio, a young woman in her early twenties, she signs up to come. Amazingly, they tell the young woman no. She can’t come. “She’s not a lady” is the determination a church committee makes. What it all boils down to is a group of people saying “we’re sorry your circumstances have been bad.” “We’re sorry you weren’t raised the way you should’ve been but now, well, it’s too late.” Needless to say, those three young women don’t attend that church any more. We’ll pray for them. But I think we should pray harder for the members of that church. That they might hear the message this parable tells so powerfully.

The other story is about a church in Seattle with a most uncompromising member. Her name is Sally and she’s just as likely to show up on a Sunday morning with a bumper crop of homegrown squash to share as she will with a bum or a prostitute she’s met during her late-night evangelizing. Over the years, her faithfulness has cultivated a church which basks in the glory of the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. Now, bums are invited off the streets to fellowship suppers. Prostitutes are summoned back to member’s homes after church. One of those women of the night gathered up by that church is now a professional counselor herself. Asked how she was able to make the leap, she credits the church. Specifically, one member who had her over for Sunday lunch. At that luncheon, the hostesses’ 1 year old daughter was there. And that baby crawled up over to the woman. Not knowing what to do, the prostitute stared at her hostess with the sad eyes of the “too late.” She just knew this woman didn’t really want a prostitute touching her baby. So, she expected to have the hostess come and move the baby away, to prevent the child from making contact with someone feeling so unclean. Instead, the hostess smiled and said “pick her up, she’s real friendly.” Reflecting back on that lunch, the former prostitute said she saw the eyes of God staring back at her as she looked in that little child’s face. And in that little child’s smile she realized something she’d been waiting her whole life to understand – “It’s

never too late for God.”

No matter who you are, “too later” or “early bird”, the Good News of Grace shines like a brilliant light cutting through the gloom of past disappointments just as it softens the hardness of our hearts. God is generous with Grace and you can never be too late!

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