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Pentecost 16

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Joy of Giving Life”
Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Many people these days live paycheck to paycheck. They depend on getting that check at the end of the week to pay their bills and buy what they need. They have little savings, if any, to fall back on. So their income is not just a matter of having money or not - it is about having what they need to live.

That was the situation even more of many folks in biblical times. There was no middle class as we know it today. There were the haves and the have nots. The rich and the poor. And the distance between them was considerable.

It is with that in mind that we need to hear the parable that Jesus tells today. Workers are being hired at all hours of the day - some at the beginning of the work day, but some just an hour before quitting time. Not much they could do. Seems like a waste of time. But no work that day, no pay. And no pay, no food for the table that night. Or, at least, less food. Maybe just enough to stop the growls and hunger pangs so you can get to sleep. Labor was precious. Labor wasn't just a job, it was life. For these men and their families.

So when it comes time to pay these workers, and each receives a full days wage, it means food on the table. For husband, wife, children, and maybe even extended family. It means *life*. Life for all. And that, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of heaven is all about. Life. Life for all. Which is, and *always* is, a gift.

For that is why Jesus came - to give life. Life isn't just something that happens. It is, and *always* is, a gift.

But Jesus has come to give even more than that. He wants for you not just a little life, but abundant life (John 10:10). He is lavish with His **forgiveness**, that we live lives free from the burden of guilt and shame. He is generous with His **Spirit**, that we live lives not of isolation, but joined to Christ and to one another. He is bountiful with His **love**, that we live lives confident and secure in His love, and not in doubt or questioning if we are worthy or not. And all this for all people. Life-long Christians and new Christians the same. Those baptized as infants or just moments before death. Jesus wants to give life. Always. Fully. Generously. Abundantly.

But such generosity, such *grace*, is not always appreciated. Those hired first wanted more; thought they deserved more. And when they didn't get it, they grumbled. Which is more than just complaining - it is grumbling against the owner of the vineyard. It is discontent and accusing this kind and generous owner of being NOT good. More for others meant less for them, they thought. So they were being wronged. And a day that started with joy ended with anger and bitterness for them. Because it became about the money.

But for the owner, it wasn't about the money. If it was, he wouldn't have done what he did. Paying people for work that *wasn't* done is a quick way to go out of business! But he didn't see it that way. He was providing life. Using what he had, using his business, to help others. Which is never wrong . . . *is it?*

Well, apparently, it was . . . for those who were all about the money. For those for whom life isn't a gift but a competition. Or for those who think that more money, more blessings, more stuff, means more life. But if that's where you find your life or are looking for your life - in what you have, in the things of this world - then you are looking in the wrong place. Then the things of this world have become your idols.

It's an easy trap to fall into, as fallen people in a fallen world. If only I had *that* I would be happier. If only I had *more* my life would be better. If only I could *get* what I wanted . . . But there's no way off that treadmill. There's *always* more. And life becomes an endless chasing, an endless desiring, an endless grumbling. And while you're striving for more stuff, you're actually getting less life. Because your idols are *stealing* your life, not giving you life.

So better is to think differently. Like the owner of the vineyard, who is, of course, our Lord. Who is generous to a fault, some people would say. *Foolish* with how He gives His gifts. Unless He's not just giving gifts, but giving life. And by giving life, giving joy, both to others and to Himself. For picture the owner of the vineyard standing behind his foreman as he paid those who arrived late in the day - what joy and satisfaction he would receive in seeing their joy at receiving much more than they thought they would. But then, too, how sad at the grumbling of those he hired first. Acting like spoiled children. Why was it wrong to be generous?

Perhaps we should ask ourselves that same question . . . when we begrudge others receiving more than us . . . when we are stingy with our own giving or our giving of forgiveness . . . when we think of life in terms of what we have and what we get rather than as the gift of God it is. That it *always* is. So better to find our joy not in the gifts, but in the Giver of those gifts. And then we will perhaps rejoice in His generosity, too.

Because rejoicing in the Giver means rejoicing in the one who gives not just stuff, but

who gave His very life for you. The one who was first who became last, so that you who are last might be first. You can work all day and all your life and never deserve that. **The cross of Christ is the gift of God to give you life.** Life now and life forever.

And as this Narrative Divine Service has been explaining, that is the gift that is here for you - whether you've been a Christian all your life, or just the last hour. Every man, woman, and child receives the same forgiveness, the same Spirit, the same Body and Blood, the same promises. And when you come and receive those gifts, your Father in heaven is not just well-pleased, but positively joyful. For like the owner of the vineyard, there is nothing that gives Him greater joy than when you receive His gifts with joy. And rejoice in others receiving them too.

And if you think there's someone who doesn't deserve that forgiveness, that gift . . . that's not your call. Don't grumble against the generosity of the Father and begrudge Him of His joy.

Far better is to rejoice in the generosity of your God. For He is generous to you, too. He didn't have to call YOU into His vineyard, but He did. To give you life. And that life He has for others, too. A gift - for life is, and *always* is, a gift that He loves to give.

So while I do not know what hour of that day it is - that is, how close to when our Lord will return - it is not yet the end of the day. So still He is calling, still bringing folks into His vineyard, to give them life. To be generous with them. To give them joy. And as I stand here and proclaim that forgiveness, speak His promises, and place the Body and Blood of Jesus into your mouths, imagine your Father standing behind me with the biggest smile you can imagine on His face! Because nothing gives Him more joy than when sinners come here and receive His gift of forgiveness and life. Nothing. *That's* what the kingdom of heaven is like.

So I don't know if you're one of those people who live paycheck to paycheck, but as Christians, that kind of how we are. We live week to week, and come here each week - not to receive what we've earned, what we've deserved - but exactly what we don't; what we *haven't* worked for, but what Jesus has provided for us, and now gives to us. His gifts. His gifts that we need to make it through another week of falling short in sin, of being sinned against, of receiving bad news, of struggle, of sickness and pain, of hard feelings and hurt feelings, of grumbling and discontent. And we come here. Maybe you didn't even really want to. Maybe it was tough, your burdens weighing you down. One more tough slog at the end of a week of slogging through the muck of life.

But you did, because you need this. You need the gifts. You need the life. You need to hear that your sins and failures are forgiven, and receive the Body and Blood of your Saviour. And that's exactly what your kind and generous Father gives you here. And it brings Him such joy. He is not disappointed with you. He is glad that you're here, and

glad to give you what you don't deserve. Because everything from Him is, and *always* is, a gift. That you may have life, and have it abundantly.

And that, my friends, is not the way the world works. But it is, as Jesus said, what the kingdom of heaven is like. Thanks be to God!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.