

Sermon September 24, 2023
[Matthew 20:1-16]

The Generosity of Grace
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

For today's message I want you to listen especially closely to what I say. See if you notice anything different or unusual. We'll come back to that at the end.

This morning we delve into the heart of a parable that has puzzled, provoked and provided insight for generations. Matthew 20:1-16, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.

Now before we dive in, I must confess something. As I was reflecting on this parable, I couldn't help but think of how it might play out in the Star Wars universe. Imagine Darth Vader hiring Stormtroopers at different times of the day, and then paying them all the same. I can hear the early recruits now, echoing Darth Vader, "This isn't the compensation we're looking for." But as with many things in the galaxy, there's more than meets the eye.

Now the story Jesus tells is simple. A landowner hires laborers throughout the day, from dawn till just about an hour before quitting time. Yet when the day ends, he pays them all the same wage. Those who worked all day – and I tried to emphasize this in the reading – grumble. They feel cheated. They expected more since they bore the day's heat and worked the longest. But here's the twist: the landowner, representing our heavenly Father, isn't being unfair. He's being *generous*. The workers hired first agreed to a day's wage, and that's precisely what they received: a day's wage. The landowner's generosity to those hired later doesn't diminish his fairness to the first group; it magnifies his grace.

Now I know what some of you might be thinking. "Pastor Dan, if I were running that vineyard, I'd have a Yelp review full of complaints by the end of the week!" And you're right. You would. From a business perspective, it seems a tad unconventional.

But God's kingdom doesn't operate according to our sense of corporate or conventional wisdom. This parable challenges our human notions of fairness. We often equate fairness with everyone getting exactly what they deserve. But God's grace *isn't* about what we deserve. It's about what God generously *gives*. And thank goodness for that, because if I got what I deserved, I'd probably be stuck in a never-ending loop of watching Jar Jar Binks scenes from Star Wars – and trust me, nobody wants that, especially me.

But let's get serious for a moment. This parable isn't just about wages in the vineyard. It's about the vastness of God's grace. Whether you've been a Lutheran Christian your whole life, or you've just come to know Jesus Christ, the gift of salvation is the same. It's not a reward for the hours we put in, but a testament to God's boundless love.

Now, I remember a time when I tried to bake a cake for the church potluck. I followed the recipe, measuring everything, and after hours of hard work, not under the scorching heat of the sun, but in front of the scorching heat of the oven, I pulled it out of the oven, and it collapsed. (All of you know about my cooking.) My neighbor, on the other hand, whipped up a cake in half the time, and it looked like something out of a *Gourmet* magazine. Was it fair? Not by my standards. But it was a humbling reminder that sometimes the results aren't proportional to the effort.

And sometimes, in God's wisdom, that's precisely the point in our lives, we often compare our blessings, our challenges, our successes, and our failures to those of others, especially on social media. But this parable reminds us that God's love isn't something to be measured or rationed. It's abundant, it's overflowing, and it's available to all, regardless of when they come to the vineyard.

So, the next time you feel the pangs of jealousy, or the weight of comparison, remember the workers in the vineyard. Remember that God's grace isn't about earning, or deserving. It's about receiving with a grateful heart.

In conclusion, as we navigate the vineyards of our lives, let's not get caught up in who got what and when. Instead, let's celebrate the generous landowner, our Holy Father in heaven, who gives, not based on our merit, but out of his immense love.

And just remember, if you ever feel like the worker who came late to the vineyard, at least you didn't have to show up in a galaxy far, far away with Jar Jar Binks as your guide.

May God's grace and generosity guide us all.

And all God's people said, Amen.

I'm still standing here...

Now, did you notice anything different or unusual about today's message? If you did, what? Was it the language? Was it the structure? Was it the examples? Was it the theology? Well, if you did – and I'd love to hear if you did after the service – the reason that sounded different is that *I didn't write the sermon*. The sermon was produced by AI, by ChatGPT, using the following prompt:

"You are Pastor Dan Peterson of Queen Anne Lutheran Church, (the most amazing little church in the world!) Write a 1,000-word sermon with insights and inspiration drawn from Matthew 20:1-16. Include three moments of humor characteristic of Pastor Dan's work. Bonus points for a Star Wars joke."

So how do you feel knowing that the source was not a man, but a machine? A robot? Artificial Intelligence? Does it change the way you feel about this message? Does it seem somehow "off"? It should... I mean, you know full well that I'm never going to use an example of baking a cake; I don't know how to do that. Hours of training couldn't help me do that. I can't even microwave food properly!

And “the annual church potluck”? That’s interesting. So, a lot of the examples there... also did you notice the language of “Holy Father in heaven”? I never talk about God that way! Because I don’t believe God is simply “up there.” God is in, with, and under everything. God, as I said in the opening prayer, is the ground of our being.

So, these differences may have changed the way you feel about the message, knowing now that it wasn’t produced by your preacher. If you felt this way, you are not alone. A recent study shows that “religious adherents perceive “robot preachers” and the institutions which employ them, as less credible than human preachers.”

Interesting, huh? Here’s what’s more interesting: “And yet, while participants said they believe human preachers were more credible, it was still a close contest with the robots. On a scale from one to five, with five being the most credible, the robot preachers received an average credibility rating of 3.12 compared with 3.51 for human preachers. That’s a razor-thin margin! Does everything hang in the balance of half a percentage point? Is this sermon any less credible because it came from however-slightly-tweaked AI—or does a human component that comes from a human being give it more credibility?

One of the things I heard at the end of the first service was “I knew this wasn’t your sermon, Pastor Dan.”

“Why?”

She said, “Because I didn’t take any notes.”

She felt that it was superficial and repetitive, and I would agree; but at the same time, there are a couple moments in the sermon that are really meaningful. For example, the claim that God isn’t being unfair, God is being generous.

So, maybe AI can give us insight here and there. But maybe if we rely on it for more than that, we find ourselves in a hopeless race against robots.

Let’s pray. God of grace, you come to us in various ways: through the preaching of the Gospel, through the hymns we sing, through the sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism, and especially, through a word of grace from another person.

We ask that you help us use AI responsibly as a tool, not as a replacement of the creative work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Keep us mindful, accordingly, of the promise this new technology brings, as well as the perils (along with bad Star Wars jokes). In Jesus’ name we pray,

Amen.

I would love to hear more about your experience of today’s sermon after the service, so please share with me what you what you felt then. Amen.