Septuagesima
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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 20: 16 SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST LAST.

SURPRISE VERDICT

Our Lord was quite a story-teller. All of His stories had a sharp point. That is why, I suppose, we call them parables. Actually, these parables are just fictional tales or little illustrations with a single punch to them. Some of them, like this one, have a mule kick to them. Jesus is telling us something about God - something mighty surprising - especially for people who feel they have God in their hip-pocket and can pull Him out whenever it suits their purposes. For many people it is really quite disconcerting to hear Him say: SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST LAST! disheartening

You can just see that employer going out into his vineyard early in the morning to hire workers. He talks to the first group, and they agree that a denarius (a small silver coin - ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~) would be a fair wage for a day's work. People at that time considered it adequate. Later in the morning he went out again, talked to another group of workers, and hired them too. This time he did not say anything about wages at all. The men just accepted his assurance: "WHATEVER IS RIGHT I WILL GIVE YOU." Several times more during that day the employer went out with the same results. Then, one hour before quitting time, he went out and found some more men standing around with nothing to do. He asked them, "WHY ARE YOU STANDING HERE?" They replied, "BECAUSE NO ONE HAS HIRED US." So he gave them a job too. Then came the end of the day - the time for the laborers to get their pay. Those hired at the eleventh hour were paid first. They all got a denarius, the amount he had agreed to pay the men hired early in the morning. So it went down the line - each getting the same pay.

When the men who had been hired earliest came to get their pay, each of them also received a denarius. They looked at it and began to grumble, saying: "THESE LAST WORKED ONLY ONE HOUR, AND YOU HAVE MADE THEM EQUAL TO US WHO HAVE BORNE THE BURDEN OF THE DAY AND THE SCORCHING HEAT." The employer did not argue with them, but he did say to one of them: "FRIEND, I AM DOING YOU NO WRONG; DID YOU NOT AGREE WITH ME FOR A DENARIUS? TAKE WHAT BELONGS TO YOU AND GO; I CHOOSE TO GIVE

TO THIS LAST AS I GIVE TO YOU. AM I NOT ALLOWED TO DO WHAT I CHOOSE WITH WHAT BELONGS TO ME? OR DO YOU BEGRUDGE MY GENEROSITY?

Now comes the point of the story: SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST LAST."

The men who went to work in the morning had no problem in the morning. Their problem arose in the evening, and then only when they compared themselves with the others. What they were really complaining about was that the employer had given the latecomers MORE than they deserved. That bothered them. This is NOT the way they would have done things.

It raises the question of what does belong to us because we are religious people. What claim do we have on high heaven for having said some kind of "Yes" to God, and for having worked at it ever since? Peter wanted to know. In the chapter immediately preceding, he asked, "WE HAVE LEFT EVERYTHING AND FOLLOWED YOU. WHAT THEN SHALL WE HAVE?"

It may be that Jesus was directing the mule kick of this parable directly at Peter. He was certainly aiming it at the Pharisees. And they, of course, were the religious people of His day, as we are of ours. We shouldn't be forever looking down the nose at them. They just didn't like it that nonreligious people were being given priority over them. They had done their duty for the most part, and had indeed derived great satisfaction from it. It was only right that they should. But Jesus was brushing it all aside, as if it didn't rate very much in God's book. Tax collectors and harlots were getting into the Kingdom ahead of them. He was flinging the gates wide open to the scum of the earth. Where was the justice in that? - Or even decency? If "good" people had no edge at all for the good they'd done, what in God's Name was the use?

Jesus met it head on. He said in effect: "Well now, everybody thinks VERY HIGHLY of you. ISN'T THAT A FACT? So - there's your PENNY! What's the matter with it? You BARGAINED for it, didn't you? It's what you wanted. As for these others, is God not allowed to do as He likes with what belongs to Him? Can't He

give them what He wants to? You take this that belongs to you and be off!" And it sounds a bit too much like the crack of doom for any of us to shrug it off or dismiss it lightly. I think of that last sentence in the story of the scatter-brained girls who hadn't brought any oil in their lamps, and while they were running down to the store for some, the bridegroom came, "AND THE DOOR WAS SHUT." Or of what Jesus said one day about the pious who wanted their piety to show -- so they did their alms, and prayed, and fasted to be seen of men. "VERILY I SAY UNTO YOU - it was His only comment - THEY HAVE THEIR REWARD!"

The point is that the Christian religion can never be turned into a pay-as-you-go proposition! That would be to enter on a cash-and-carry relationship with God - which would make of him NOT the God of the Bible at all, but a god we have fashioned in our own image. Look at the CROSS! What else does it mean - except that this is God's way of CANCELLING ALL WAGES! That's what the GRACE OF GOD is all about. The poorest wage paid that day was the wage that was bargained for! All the best God has to give moves along other lines. So the parable goes on to say, doesn't it, that only when you claim nothing do you have something. If you try to assert any claim, you will find that what belongs to you will NOT seem to be a great deal. On the other hand, If you have never given a thought to asserting any claim - knowing full well that you have none - what belongs to you will be "THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST" and all that follows it in the New Testament - "THE LOVE OF GOD, AND THE COMMUNION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT."

The great thing is that you should be asked to go into the vineyard at all. Here God holds out to you His pardon, when pardon is the last thing you deserve. That's why it is never cheap. You are not at any bargain counter now. That day up by the lake, after the Resurrection, Peter would never even have dreamed of asking his question: "WE HAVE LEFT EVERYTHING AND FOLLOWED YOU. WHAT THEN SHALL WE HAVE?" He was beginning to think less of what he had left for Christ's sake, and more of what Christ had left for his sake. Three times over Jesus kept asking, "SIMON, SON OF JOHN, DO YOU LOVE ME?" -- once for every denial there

among the shadows by the fire in the court of the high priest's palace. Peter could scarcely bear it - as who can? - and kept blurting out: "LORD, YOU KNOW THAT I LOVE YOU."..... I wish I could say that nothing else mattered to him any more, but I can't. At the first hint that the future was not going to be a bed of roses, he wanted to know how JOHN would get along. Everybody knew that Jesus loved John - HOW WOULD JOHN DO? The answer he received was the only thing this God of the broken heart could say - the only thing left to say - He would take Peter even on those terms: "WHAT IS THAT TO YOU? FOLLOW ME!"

The Grace of God offers us pardon, when pardon is the last thing we deserve It offers us life and salvation! In that moment we are only too happy to be in the vineyard at all - and I can tell you this: You won't even notice - you won't even be aware of the long days or the scorching heat! - all the hours of overtime! And you will rejoice with the ANGELS in heaven over one MORE SINNER who repents - even if it is at the eleventh hour - ESPECIALLY if it is at the eleventh hour!

I have read that there was a man once "who looked...back on his way to hell. God said to him, "Why have you turned back? Surely You have read the black scroll of your misdeed? What did you expect? Why do you tarry?" The man hesitated for a moment, and then said: "I had great hope of Thy loving-kindness!" So God turned to another who had labored hard and long and said: "I CHOOSE TO GIVE TO THIS LAST AS I GIVE TO YOU." Amen.