

God's Infuriating Mercy

Sixteenth Week after Pentecost, Year A

Primary Text: Matt. 19:16–20:16

Secondary Texts: Jonah 3:10–4:11, Psalm 145:1–8, Phil. 1:21–30

Church of the Savior, September 23, 2017

Good evening, I'm Ted Olsen, I'm a member here at Church of the Savior, and I have a cold, so forgive me if I pass the peace tonight with a fistbump instead of a holy handshake. This is the third week in our series Behold Our God, on the divine attributes. The one we're looking at tonight appears more than once in our readings, and it's one of the most frequent descriptions of God in the Old Testament:

"The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love."

That's the long form. The short form is one word that summarizes that entire description: Mercy. Now, when I was growing up, we had a nice explanation that grace is getting what you don't deserve, and mercy is *not* getting what you *do* deserve. That's true, that's part of it, but mercy is bigger than that: It's a way of talking about God's love, his compassion, his kindness, his forgiveness, his help, his *goodness*. All of that is mercy.

"The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love."

We heard it twice in our readings this evening, once as praise and once as lament. Once, from David, as a celebration of grace and mercy. And once from Jonah as a cry for justice and judgment. Once as celebration: You do not hold my sins against me! You have not given me what I deserve! Once

as accusation: Aren't you going to hold them accountable for their sins?
Aren't you going to give them what they deserve?

Well, this question—what do we deserve? What do I get, and what do they get? is all through our readings today. Do I get to see my enemies fall? Do I get justice? Do I get rewarded? Do I get to live? Do I get to die? What do I get? What do they get?

Well, as we just heard, the last will be first and the first will be last, so let's start first with what we read about last: The denarius.

A denarius looks like a dime. Same size, same weight. Same silvery look. But the gospels tell us that it was about a day's wage. A denarius is a day's wage. If you're a day laborer hoping for work picking grapes. If you get to the market early enough, and if you have something special that makes you one of the first people hired—maybe you know someone who knows someone. Maybe you've got something that just says "That dude would be good at picking grapes." If you get hired early enough and work hard enough, a denarius is about a day's wage.

Some commentaries suggest then that the people hired late in the day were the least desirable workers. The parable doesn't say, but it does say they hadn't been hired. They weren't expecting to earn their day's wage, to be able to pay for their daily bread. They didn't deserve a denarius, but they got one anyway because the landowner, or the lord (lowercase l) was gracious and compassionate.

But that's not the punchline of the parable. To really get the punchline, we need to know why Jesus told it. Our gospel reading starts, "For." Jesus is

continuing a discussion already in progress. And that story starts with a man who had many denarii. A man who probably thought a denarius was not a big deal, but it turned out for him it was a really big deal.

In many stories about rich men, the rich man is not a good man. But in this story, the rich man is a very good man. So good, in fact, that he worried that he wasn't good enough.

So this good man went to Jesus because he saw Jesus as a wise teacher. There were always a lot of people around Jesus asking him very hard things. How should we respond to the government? What should the rules be about sex? How many times do I have to be gracious and compassionate to someone? These are the questions in Matthew that precede the rich man's question. So he asked his question:

What good thing do I have to do to get eternal life?

It's a good question. Literally. It's a *good* question.

Jesus responds, as he usually does, with his own question: "Why do you ask me about what is good?" "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments. Do what the One who is good has told you to do!"

Can you be more specific? The rich man asked. *Which* commandments, exactly?

Jesus answered the man with a difficult and famous list:

Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't lie about people. Honor your father and mother. And love your neighbor as yourself.

Those, of course, are from the Ten Commandments. The Commandments God gave Moses after the Israelites decided to worship a golden calf instead of the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob who had brought them out of Egypt. The commandments that God gave after he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."

As I said, the rich man was a good man. He knew the Commandments God had given Moses. I've done those already, he said. I haven't murdered, I haven't committed adultery, I haven't stolen, I haven't lied about people, I've honored my parents, and I've loved my neighbor. I love my neighbor like I love myself. What else. What am I missing?

Jesus said, well, if you want to be perfect, Go sell everything you have, give it to the poor. You'll have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.

The good rich man didn't have any questions after that. He left and was sad. Because he was very rich. He liked his denarii.

Jesus said to his disciples, "It is really, really hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. It'd be easier to push a camel through the eye of a needle."

Matthew says the disciples were "greatly astonished and asked who then can be saved." He doesn't say why they were greatly astonished. I'm not sure it was because they thought rich people were better than them. I think maybe they thought this particular rich guy might have been better than them.

I think it might have gone like this: Wait a second, *that* guy can't enter the kingdom of heaven?... That guy was awesome. You just summarized the commandments and *he* said, Yep, I did those. *I'm* not so great at the whole love your neighbor thing. *He's* not so great at it. If that guy can't get in, who can get in? Who can be saved?

Jesus looked at them and said, "Yeah. It's impossible. There's no way on earth. But with God, anything is possible."

Peter was one of the disciples. And he was still doing the math. "Wait a second. That rich guy doesn't want to give up his stuff, and you're saying that's what makes it hard for him to enter the kingdom of heaven. I did give up my stuff! I gave up all my stuff! All 12 of us did. What do *we* get?"

Jesus answered like this: "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much *and* will inherit eternal life. *But* many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

And then comes this parable of the Generous Landowner.

"Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

For. Because. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a day's wage for the day's work and sent them to go pick grapes.

About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' He didn't promise a denarius. They probably thought they'd get a little less. But it was already 9. They'd already missed the all-day jobs for the all-day pay. So they went to get "whatever is right." Whatever the landowner was willing to give, it was better than standing around the marketplace.

The landowner went out again about noon and did the same thing. 3 o'clock, does the same thing. Five o'clock, an hour before he's going to wrap up and pay everyone, he goes back to the marketplace and there were still people there looking for work.

"Why have you still here?" he asked them. 7 "Because no one has hired us," they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."

The landowner, you see, wants the first workers to see his generosity. He wants them to see his goodness. He wants them to see that he is gracious and compassionate, merciful to those who would have had less than a day's wage, even those who've done less than a day's work.

They deserved an hour's pay. Instead, they get 12 hours pay. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. They probably expected 12 denarii. 12 days' wages. Instead they got 1 denarius.

And to them this seemed very wrong and they became angry.

Is this what we get? 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' They don't deserve that! Or if they do, we deserve more!

And the landowner looked one of them in the eye and said, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. My mercy is not injustice. You agreed to work for a denarius. All I did was give these guys a denarius, too. You're getting pretty worked up over this denarius. You didn't have to work for me. You don't have to work for me tomorrow. But here's the thing: I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Are you envious because I am generous? Literally. in the Greek: Has your eye gone evil with envy because I'm good?"

Then Jesus wraps it up with the same words that preceded the parable: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Peter asked, We gave up a lot to follow you. We're bearing the burden of the work and the heat of the day. What do we get?

Jesus says: Well, if you ask it that way, you'll get a lot. But did you hear the story and think it was about the denarius?

The rich young man asked, “What good thing do I have to do to get eternal life?”

Jesus says: Well, if you ask it that way, you’ll have to do a lot. But did you hear the story and think it was about the denarius?

Listen again: Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, *follow me*.”

Jesus said to them, “When the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have *followed me* will also sit on twelve thrones.”

The landowner said, “You also go and work in my vineyard.”

He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.

He asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’”

“I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go.”

The landowner didn’t *need* you to work in his vineyard. He’s gracious and compassionate. Merciful to those who need their daily bread. Rich and abounding in steadfast love. You can focus on the denarius. You can keep asking, “What do I get, what does he get”? You can take your pay and go. Or you can rejoice in being with the landowner who has personally called you into his vineyard. You can demand your denarii. Or you can be with the landowner.

If you're a disciple, you can focus on the thrones and the crowns and judging the 12 tribes. You can focus on the gifts. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. There's a lot of surprises in the Kingdom of Heaven. You can focus on the gifts, or you can focus on the giver.

If you're the rich man, wondering "What good thing do I have to do to get eternal life?" You can focus on the good *thing*, or you can focus on the Good *One*. You can focus on the part that says "sell all you have" and go away sad or you can focus on the part that says "follow me" and come into the kingdom rejoicing. Do you believe that he's gracious and compassionate and rich and *good* enough to take care of you?

By the way, this is Martin Luther's story, in case you didn't know that. When he was 21 he almost got struck by lightning, which scared him so much that he vowed to become a monk. He started by selling all he had and giving it to the poor. But it wasn't enough. What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life? I have kept all the commandments. What else do I need to do? That was his question. As a monk, he prayed more than anyone. Fasted like crazy, gave up sleep, he was obsessed with doing good. And still he wrote, "my soul feels and drinks nothing but eternal punishment." And then one day it clicked in for him. "The righteousness of God is a gift of God. Faith is a gift from God. The Lord is gracious and compassionate to me, who can never be righteous enough! It's not about what I deserve, whether I deserve eternal life through my righteousness or deserve eternal punishment for my unrighteousness. It's about The Life. It's not about my salvation. It's about the Savior. It's not about what I've given up, it's about what he gave up.

If you're Jonah, and many of us here are Jonah. Just fed up with injustice and those who oppress the innocent. The Assyrians weren't just foreigners. They'd laid siege to Jerusalem. They beheaded their enemies. Impaled them. Took slaves and made them behead and impale their friends and family. Jonah wanted them destroyed, and he had good reason for it. But he was so focused on the judgment that he lost sight of the Judge. He didn't trust that God would make good on his promise to be merciful to the oppressed. He could mouth the words that the "Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love," but he wasn't quite sure that God could be merciful to Nineveh and Israel too. Jonah wanted justice so bad that he fled God. He wanted to take his denarius of righteous judgment now, and go.

If you're Paul. Well, we haven't looked at Paul yet. But here's what he says to the Philippians in tonight's reading: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."

Paul says: I'll labor in the vineyard and be paid whatever the landowner thinks is right. If it's life, great! It's the landowner's life anyway: I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me . And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and gave himself up for me.

If my payment is to be executed by Rome: great! Not only will I get to be with Christ, which is better by far, but I get to participate in the same kind of death

he died, which will make me more *like* Christ. If I live, Christ, if I die, I gain more Christ!

Here is someone completely convinced that the Lord is completely gracious and completely compassionate, completely abounding in steadfast love. That's all he wants.

I'll be honest. I am not there yet. I'm much more like the rich man and the first laborers and Peter than I am like Paul. My little denarius is really shiny and really distracting. I get worried that someone, maybe even God, is ripping me off. Will doing good things be worth it? Will I regret giving up my stuff? I see outrageous injustice in the world and it feels pretty good to be outraged by it. God doesn't seem to be doing what I want him to do about it.

I get worried: You're gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in love. I've seen it. You've been gracious and compassionate to me. Thank God you've been slow to anger, because I've given you plenty of reason for anger. You've been rich in love. You've shown me mercy and grace. Already 100 times more than anything I've given up. But still: what about tomorrow? What about right now? Are you still gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in love? Are you still the one who is Good?

I have a hard time some days believing his answer, but his answer is always the same: Go work in my vineyard today and I will give you whatever is right. But more than that: I give you myself.

Amen.