

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost • September 18, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Matthew 20:1-16

"Variance"

It's that time of the year. Schools are back in session, the weather is starting to shift into Fall, and (perhaps most significantly) Starbucks has brought back the Pumpkin Spice Latte. I'm not much of a coffee drinker, but I've heard from many people that this is something worth trying. Its limited-time-only availability probably doesn't hurt its popularity, either. Now imagine that you were a loyal Starbucks customer, a caffeinated connoisseur of their many offerings who even has one of those gold Starbucks cards in your wallet. Because you are such a loyal customer, the company sent you a postcard in the mail that entitles you to free Pumpkin Spice Latte – not just a *tall*, or even a *grande*: you can get a *venti*! Gleefully, you take your free-drink postcard down to your Starbucks, because you have been waiting for the return of this fabled beverage since last year. You get in line with your coupon in hand, ready to place your order. But there's someone ahead of you, someone who is apparently a Starbucks novice, asking the person behind the counter, "Is that Pumpkin Spice Latte any good? I don't really drink much coffee, but I saw the signs out front." (Actually, it's probably me standing there asking the question.) So the barista says to this person, "Tell you what, how about I just give you one so that you can really try it out? And how about you pick out one of those venti-size travel mugs and I'll put it in that. On the house!" You see this all taking place right in front of you and are simply stunned. This person, who obviously does not deserve the seasonal deliciousness that is coming his way, is getting an even better deal than the one you've been expecting. And that's just not right, is it?

Something similar is going on as Jesus teaches his disciples. He's just made it known to them that riches can be a stumbling block in life. So Simon Peter and the disciples asked him something to the effect of, "We know that having a lot of stuff can be a bad thing. What do *we* get, who have left behind everything to follow you?" The question implied is, "What do we merit? What have we earned?" Jesus sets things straight for us with the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

There are two parts to the parable, and the first half seems pretty straightforward. The lord of the vineyard goes to the marketplace to hire some of the workers who gather there each day. He first arrives at the dawn of the day, around 6:00 a.m. as we'd figure it. The workers agree to do the work he's proposed for a denarius, the average pay for a day's labor, and they go off to get started. But the master comes back to the marketplace again – and again and again. Each time, he hires yet more workers, telling them that he'll pay them a just wage. Finally, he returns to the marketplace around 5:00 p.m., the eleventh hour of the work day, and sees these stragglers standing around. "Why have you been standing around here all day?" is his question. Their answer: "No one has hired us!" And the vineyard owner brings them back to work for that very last part of the day.

At the close of the day, after all the work has been done, the second part of the parable begins: it's pay time! The master tells his foreman to pay the most recent arrivals first. As the workers queue up to get what's coming to them, we hearers have to wonder: What are they going to receive? What payment does the lord of the vineyard think fit for someone who's only worked less than an hour? A denarius! You might imagine that the other workers in line think that this is a good sign: if these end-of-day guys got the full days' wage, what then will the master award to those of them that put in a full twelve hours of labor in the heat of the sun? So the time comes for those who worked the longest to be paid, and they receive... a denarius. How *dare* the master not give more to them!

You and I can be a lot like those workers. When you perceive a variance between yourself and someone else, you might very well experience a loss of contentment. In life, when you witness something varying from how it should be, when your expectation is not met and you feel like you're not getting what you merit, envy can rear its head in your mind and heart. But isn't it funny that this variance only really matters to you when that other person is getting more than you think they should? If you're the one getting more than you think (or know) that you ought, you're apt to just accept it and keep quiet. But

envy can really stick with you. You and I might have our pride, our perceived self-worth, offended. And why shouldn't we be offended?

To some extent, all of us men, women, and children carry an expectation of entitlement. We think that we deserve that which we are owed, based on our labor or status or standing. But what reward is owed us, to what are we entitled? Everything that we have earned – nothing less! Our worthiness demands payment. In the language of the world, more worth merits more reward, while less worth should lead to less reward. That's what's fair, right? To put it another way, the first should be first and the last should be last.

But Jesus upends the disciples' expectations along with ours in this parable. Yes, it's surprising that those eleventh-hour workers receive the same pay as those who labored longer. Consider this, though: Did the workers who bore the heat of the day get what was promised them? They did indeed. They didn't complain in the marketplace when the owner of the vineyard promised them a full day's wage. They would likely have gone home content if they had never learned what the other workers were paid. So who threw everyone for a loop? The master did. Jesus' parable isn't mainly about how much time the workers spent in the vineyard; rather, **it's pointing us to the master's generosity and the abundance that he has to give.**

Look back to the first part of the parable to see how the master's generosity is at work from the very start. It's not the workers' worthiness that's exceptional. All of those men standing around the marketplace were day laborers, first and last people who didn't have steady work. In a pretty significant way, these laborers were worse off than the slaves of the time since they had no guarantee of work. They had no way of providing for themselves or their families; they were entirely dependent on the master who would hire them. You and I are much the same.

The reigning of heaven, even for us right now, is much like those workers called to the vineyard. Neither you nor I nor any of Jesus' followers is worthy of what he gives, not one. It's not about your merit, not about how great you are. We are all entirely dependent on God's generosity. Really, there's no variance among us in that regard! Your works, your length of time as a Christian – none of that makes you more deserving than any other person. And God continues to call people as workers into His vineyard, into His Church. He does this out of His abundance to give, the amazing extent of which we see on the cross. God gave Himself for unworthy, envious people like you and like me, giving us everything that we would need, showing us His love.

Thankfully, God's love is without variance! Think of it this way: God is giving you the biggest Pumpkin Spice Latte of sweet salvation that has ever been poured, on the house. The Lord has invited you to experience a life walking with Him. Jesus' parable isn't meant to have people wait until the eleventh hour right before they die to come to faith; rather, life lived with God is even better, like a dollop of whipped cream crowning your drink. You and I are called in by God's "limited time offer" to work in His vineyard, to share in the fellowship that He gives us all as His people.

As you work with all your fellow believers in Jesus' vineyard, following him, remember what the Lord has given you out of his loving generosity and see how that changes life. That envy which came with seeing the variance in what others have that you think you should have falls away. In its place you will find contentment and enjoyment of what God has given to you. That expectation of entitlement passes away, and in its place springs up thanksgiving and appreciation in a joyful heart. Jesus upends our expectations, and that is not a bad thing!

As we move into Fall, and Pumpkin Spice Lattes are poured by baristas around our region, we remember all the blessings that our Lord gives us. Thanks be to God that His love does not vary! Our reward, life with Him that knows no Fall, has been paid in full by Jesus!

Amen.