

HOUSE POSTIL OF THE BLESSED MARTIN LUTHER

for Septuagesima, A.D. 1534

This is a rather subtle Gospel lesson; young people and mean-spirited people will learn very little here. Nevertheless, since it's read on this Sunday, we'll go through it quickly and say something about it.

It's a parable about a householder who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard, agreeing with them on the usual wage, one denarius for a full's day work. Afterwards he hired others who worked nine hours; still later, some who worked six, and others three hours; and finally some who labored only one hour. But in the evening, he paid these last ones the same one denarius that he had promised those whom he hired early in the morning. The hours worked varied greatly, but the wages were the same! Except in the case of the very first ones hired, the householder had not promised an specific wage. The paycheck was the same - those who had labored twelve hours receiving no more, and those working only one hour receiving no less; each worker received exactly the same amount! That's the parable.

Now obviously such a standard would not be acceptable in ordinary labor relations; it just wouldn't be fair. In the marketplace there's a different measure and rule: He who labors hard and long gets higher wages; he who works less gets, comparatively, less pay. And yet, even here, if a worker does receive his agreed upon wage, he really has no reason to grumble if his employer - out of the goodness of his heart - wants to reward some other worker with a little extra. In principle, however, it is not right to pay equal wages for disproportionate labor.

The Lord told the parable in this fashion so as to distinguish clearly between his kingdom and the worldly realm, and thus to remind us that his kingdom operates with principles different from the standards of the world. On the world scene there can be no equality simply because people themselves are so diverse. That's why, as a general rule, he who has labored more, also receives more pay. It does happen that one who has worked less, nevertheless, gets more; but when this happens a different interpretation is being followed. What one person gets as a free gift, cannot be claimed as a right by the next person. Case in point: the owner of the house has much more property than this servant, even though the servant puts in more physical labor than his employer. Such disparity exists of necessity in the worldly realm. In Christ's kingdom, however, there should be no such difference. All are to be equal, one the same as the other; each to have and be "worth" as much as the next one.

Outwardly, then, there is a difference; inequality will and must remain in the public domain simply because of the diversity of professions and occupations. A farmer's lifestyle is different from that of the townsman, a prince occupies a different role than a nobleman; here there's lots of inequality - and it needs to stay that way! In Christ's kingdom, however - be it king, prince, lord, servant, wife, maid, or whatever - all of them are equal! None has a different baptism, gospel, faith, sacrament, or a different Christ and God. Together they all go to church; servant, townsman, farmer all hear the same Word as the lord, prince, and nobleman hear. The baptism I have is the same one that any little maid receives; the faith Peter and Paul had is the same faith Magdalene and the thief on the cross had; as Christians you and I also have it. John the Baptist's God and Christ is the same one every repentant sinner has! Here, then, all are the same, even though the one is higher or lower as far as his worldly status, office, or talents are concerned.

All this we need diligently to learn, so that we can rightly distinguish Christ's kingdom from all worldly realms. This is surely a very comforting Gospel for us Christians, that all of us are so wonderfully equal in Christ! As far as the world is concerned, differences remain: a father is more than the son; the lord more than the servant; the king and the prince more than his subjects. That's the will of God; he himself has created and arranged the diversity. Whoever now wants to "equalize" everyone, so that the servant counts for as much as his master, the maid has as much authority as her mistress, and the peasant as much as a prince, that would be a spectacular accomplishment - as we recently saw in the case of the rebellious peasants! And so let the world operate with its inequality as best it can. We will continue to take comfort in the fact - our station being high or low - that we all have one Christ, one baptism, one gospel, one Spirit. No one has a better gospel, a better baptism, a different or better Christ, or a different or better heaven - we are all equal!

Again, all this we should carefully note so that everyone may serve God sincerely and cheerfully, whatever his station in life, always thinking, I'm not an emperor or king, I possess neither cities or castles as great princes have, but I do, nevertheless, have the same holy baptism, and he who died to earn eternal life for me is the same Christ who saved the emperor. All of these good things we have in Christ ought to make us justly proud, so that we may have the proper perspective toward worldly goods, riches, and glory, taking courage and comfort alone from the fact that we are baptized in Jesus' name, who died for us and ascended to heaven, where he sits at God's right hand, ready to help us out of sin, death, and every misfortune.

...Knowing that in Christ's kingdom there is no inequality, we have courage and comfort, and in Christian "pride" we go forward to do what needs to be done. In this way everyone can go about his daily work in a joyful and godly manner. A Christian can truly say, I have no real reason to grumble about my station in life; it is a good and precious one, even though it be unimportant and even boring. It may not be a princely position but it is a Christian one; what more could I have or desire?

That however, was not the attitude of the "first workers," who grumbled and were envious because they weren't getting more than the others. Our monks and nuns and cleric are no different. They want our Lord to reward them according to their works as he sees how much more they have done than others; because of the overtime they have put in, they expect a higher place in heaven and a bigger and better Christ. Also they have taught that a virgin in a convent has a better faith than a married woman; and if someone in ur day teaches otherwise, he's condemned as a heretic. All such are represented by those "first ones" in the parable, who thought they should have more than the others. Piously they reported to our Lord how long they labored and how much they endured. But what did he tell them? As far as civil, public life is concerned, he says, You are unequal; whether you are a better man or work harder than someone else is not the point. But no one has a better gospel, baptism, or a better Christ than the next man.

...Accordingly we say, if you have equality in Christ - whether you are a teacher or preacher, lord or lady, servant or maid - then labor and act accordingly to whatever your station in life obligates you to do. Here you function in diversity, because of different stations and vocations. In Christ, however, we are not different but equal! This is, indeed, obnoxious to the world; the Jews particularly become mad and furious when they hear that we Gentiles are to be saved - we who are not circumcised and do not keep the Sabbath and other burdens of the Law, whose weight they bear with grievous toil and sweat. Our lord refers to that in the parable when he says that the "first hired" expected to receive more and grumbled about it when each got his denarius - even those who worked only one hour. To this very day, this is still what scandalizes the Jews. They lived under the almost beyond telling burden of the Law! Because of that they reasoned as follows: We Jews are circumcised and assumed the burden of the law; Gentiles do not submit to circumcision and are likewise under no burden of law; now are they to be equal with us who have done so much good under the Law? By no means; if God deals thus with Gentiles, then he owes us Jews much more!

But Christ will not countenance any such difference. "Friend," he says, "I am doing you no wrong; take what belongs to you, and go"; or to put it another way: You already

have your reward, namely the land of Canaan; but I am now establishing a new and different kingdom, in which all are equal. After all, the property is mine; I have the right to do my business as I think best; you have no right to lecture me on how to deal with my servants. It is thus that the Jews, in their spitefulness, are apt to lose eternal life itself, refusing to be on the same level with us Gentiles and accusing our Lord of unfair dealing in saying to them, Take you agreed upon wage and leave; it's my vineyard, not yours! What business is it of yours how I run my affairs? The Pope and his company do the same, refusing to be considered equal with us Gentiles in Christ's kingdom, and, insisting on special treatment, they wish eternal life itself.

That's why it is so important that we truly understand this difference between the world and the spiritual life, or between earthly realms and the kingdom of Christ. In his kingdom we are all to be equal, since we all have one and the same God, Christ, Holy Spirit, gospel, Holy Sacrament, and faith. On account of such equality, each one of us is as good, pious, and holy as the next person.

Because we are thus privileged, we should thank God for such gifts, truly recognize them as such, and praise him by saying, "et men regard me as they wish, consider me as inferior as they want, I, nevertheless, have as much as all emperors and kings, yes, as much as all the saints and angels in heaven! How? Through Christ! And so I'll go my way, being a father or mother, servant or maid, and doing everything my station in life requires with joy, courage, enthusiasm, and love - all because I have such great treasure in Christ my Lord.

And so to sum up, this is the teaching of today's Gospel, that here on earth there will always be inequality, even as people and stations in life are different. A prince is a different person and has a different office than a preacher; a maid, a different person with a different position than her mistress; and a schoolmaster is a different man with a different role than the mayor. Obviously then, they neither should nor can function with the same kind of lifestyle. Here in this world, then, of necessity, such differences remain. But Christ operates under a different principle in his kingdom: I will give as much to one as to the other. The reason? No one has ever succeeded in earning the kingdom of heaven - salvation from death and sin - and because of that I am not under obligation to anyone; always the kingdom comes by grace to whomsoever I will. Let's, therefore, beware of murmuring about his ways; instead, thanking God always for his underserved mercy from which we can draw comfort no matter what dangers, troubles, and labors we must bear because of seeming inequalities. This will always ease and lighten our loads. May our dear Lord Jesus Christ provide that for us all. Amen.