

Willow River Parish**Title: The Grace of a Denarius****Matthew 20:1-16**

¹ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² 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.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Good morning Church! We are living in a very difficult time. Covid-19 totally changed our daily lives. We can easily find “Masks Required” in front of stores and restaurants. Like this, masks and hand sanitizers became the necessities of our lives, and they made it hard to talk to others freely with six feet of social distance. To have a conversation, now we use phone calls, email, video calls, but we have more restrictions than face-to-face conversations.

My son was born on March, but his grandparents haven't been able to hold him in person because my parents had to cancel their flight tickets due to Covid-19. My wife has a sister, and her sister was going to get married on September 19. However, as the number of Covid-19 confirmed in South Korea has increased, the Korean government has limited the number people participating in the wedding to less than 49 so she postponed the wedding to December. And, my family and I are not sure that we will be able to attend the wedding due to Covid-19. We may join her wedding in Zoom. I graduated from the seminary this May. I studied very hard in the U.S., but I had a graduation in Zoom due to Covid-19.

The way of church worship has also changed a lot. To us, worship was to gather, listen the proclamation of the word, pray, and praise the Lord in the church on Sunday. Now we have online worship through Zoom or other platforms that we are not used to, and those who aren't used to using the Internet haven't been able to worship God since the church closed because of Covid-19. In South Korea, there is a word “Covid Blue,” which means a type of depression caused by a sense of disconnection, isolation, and loneliness as Covid-19 begins and people can't meet friends and family freely. Many people are going through disconnection, isolation, and loneliness.

Willow River Parish has reached a crossroad where we must decide to maintain online worship or to have In-Person worship. All age groups should be careful of viruses, but older people are especially vulnerable to the disease. No one can guarantee safety from Covid-19

in this area, which is an hour away from Twin Cities. However, our parish is looking for a safe way for our members to feel connected to each other. I'm also participating in the Worship Conference every Sunday evening from September 13th through October 11th to find alternative directions for worship.

Covid-19 has also depressed the global economy. Some states allowed restaurants and in-store shopping to revive their economy, but they are closing again due to a surge in Covid's confirmed cases. As the economy slows down, the competition in the labor market has increased. Many people have been forced to take a leave of absence or removal from work, and breadwinners who are responsible for their families' livelihood submit their resumes here and there to get a part-time job, but the high competition makes it very difficult to find a job.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we can see Jesus focusing on small things. 'five loaves and two fish' (Matthew 14:17), 'a camel through the eye of a needle' (Matthew 19:24), 'parable of the lost sheep' (Matthew 18:12), 'parable of mustard seed' (Matthew 13:31) indicate small things. Likewise, Jesus loved the small, the poor, and the marginalized unlike the secular world. The Gospel lesson we read for today describes the overwhelming love of God.

It is the story of workers being hired to tend to the owner's vineyard. In a legal contract, the vineyard owner agrees to pay them a set amount as they start the day at 6 a.m. A denarius means one day's wage for an ordinary laborer. It was small money. Additional workers are hired every three hours to work with the same contracted amount. To beat others in labor market competition, laborers have to be smarter and stronger than others. Those who are not employed and standing idly in the market until the day ends may be less intelligent and less powerful than others. In other words, they are the ones who have fallen behind in the competition. If they can't be hired, their families may have to starve on that day. Finally, right before sundown and the close the day, the owner went to the market and still found

others standing around. He asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” (6b) Then, they answered, “Because no one has hired us.” (7a) He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.” (7b) So they are hired at 5 p.m. and work for a very short amount of time.

When it comes time to pay the workers, the owner said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.” (8) The common sense of the vineyard owner is very different from ours. Ordinary people don’t go out to the market right before the end of the day and hire those who are not capable enough to be hired by then. But, he hired them, and everyone is given the exact same amount, no more or no less.

In the capitalist society we live in, the people who work harder, benefit more. Those who were hired early in the morning and worked hard may expect to get a little more, but in our scripture each one received the exact same pay. Those that started at the beginning of the day complained against the owner that “These men who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” (12b) However, he answered, “I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you.” (13-14) Those who came to work early in the morning may feel it is unfair to be treated the same as those who came to work for an hour at the end, but the key to this story is the tremendous love and grace of God for those who have lost their opportunity and those who lack ability, those who have been left out from the society.

In this story, God’s interest was the only salvation for human. Our heavenly Father’s heart is like the heart of the vineyard owner, who still went to find workers to pay for their wages until the close of the day. It was the amazing grace and love of God to restore the right of life for those who were left behind in the labor market and those who

were shunned. This story is not to say that you should never be the first to be like workers who came early in the morning. The first men must realize that it is already a joy to be called from the early morning. They must realize that the promise of a denarius is a great blessing. Our Christian faith goes beyond selfish competition. The kingdom of God has generosity that is always defending and caring for the marginalized and the poor. Jesus Christ, our savior, is still in the labor market to save people. What God gives is a gift and grace before price and pay.

Just as we recite the Lord's prayer, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10, NRSV), we must remember and keep in mind the kingdom of God. When we live like that, we can realize and appreciate His mercy and grace are directed at us. May our lives be always full of grace and love of our God in this difficult time, and that our hearts and minds would be restored. Amen.