

Pastor Joe Polzin  
Matthew 20:1-16  
“Look to His Hands”  
Year A – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 24, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The text for this morning’s message is from our Gospel, Matthew chapter 20. Listen again to these few verses: “Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us’” (20:10-12).

It’s always amazing to me how much non-verbal communication is done through our hands. Just think about all the things we can convey with a simple gesture. Some people talk with their hands, give a hearty handshake, offer a hug, or give a sign of encouragement. Of course, there are some other hand gestures, especially out on the road, that aren’t so nice. Either way... hand gestures can say a lot.

And hand gestures are a part of the Gospel we read today. You may think, “Well, I didn’t see anything about hand gestures...” Now, they may not immediately jump off the page at us, but when we take time to look at them, they tell us a lot.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus shares a parable. A master of a house goes out at the beginning of the day and hires workers for his vineyard. The master agrees that he will pay them a denarius, a day’s wage. And then throughout the day, he goes out and hires more workers. And as to what he’ll pay *them*, he tells them that “whatever is right [he] will give” them. There is even a group that is hired as the sun is getting low in the sky, with only one hour left to work – hired literally at the eleventh hour.

At the end of the day, the work is done, and the workers are gathered to be paid. One by one, starting with the last to be hired, they step forward and reach out their hands, ready to receive whatever the master will give them. And it must have come as quite a shock when the group that was hired *last* got a full day’s pay! They have their hands out in simple gratitude for the work they had been given, and are surprised with the generosity of the master.

So when it comes time to pay the group of workers who had “borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat,” all sorts of things were probably running through their heads. “Here it comes,” they may have thought. “We have been here the longest, and these guys who only worked an hour received a full day’s pay. I bet we’ll get at least two, three, maybe ten times that amount!” And they stuck out their hands in confident anticipation of their *extra* reward.

Well, they didn’t get anything extra. They received what was promised to them. And that’s when the grumbling begins. Their expectation was that they *deserved* more, even though that’s not what they agreed to. Their complaint was that the master made them *equal* with everyone else, and that did not sit well with them, because *they* didn’t consider themselves equal.

Jesus was telling this parable because his disciples started to have this same sort of attitude. Just four verses earlier, in chapter 19, Peter comes to Jesus. And Peter had been hearing about all the different people that Jesus was going to be welcoming into His kingdom. And Peter’s first reaction was to worry about himself. He exclaims, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will *we* have?” (19:27) Peter was reacting just like the workers in the

parable, asking, “What’s in it for me? Don’t I deserve more?” And Jesus gently explains to him that “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (19:29).

The reward we receive by following Christ is not given because we’ve deserved it somehow. It’s a gift given by the generous hand of the Master. And sinful notions of ‘fairness,’ and of inequality, and of who deserves what, don’t *belong* among God’s children. We are made equal recipients of grace, as Jesus says, “The first will be last and the last will be first.”

And by describing how grace works in the kingdom, Jesus gives us a picture of the first of the hand gestures we see today, the hands of our Heavenly Father. God the Father is just like the master in the parable and is unexpectedly generous to *everyone*. His hands are continually outstretched, outpouring His grace on us all. The eternal life He gives, no one deserves. The parable isn’t about us earning salvation. It’s about the God who gives salvation freely, and abundantly. All we can do is put our hands in a purely passive posture, and receive everything that God offers.

God also provides everything we need for this life. Luther talks about the gracious hands of our Father in his explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed. “I believe... God richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life... All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.” Psalm 145 says, “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing” (vv. 15-16).

Yet it took awhile for the disciples to truly understand this, and presumably the workers in the parable too. Sometimes *we* fail to understand God’s generous nature. Too often, we receive what God gives us, but instead of being thankful, our sinful mind takes over. And rather than focusing on His hands, we begin to look around us and lose focus altogether.

That’s what got the workers in the parable in trouble. Everything was just fine with their agreed-upon pay until they saw what others were receiving. They took their eyes off the hands of the master and started to look at the hands of the other workers. All they could focus on was what they *weren’t* getting.

Now, I’m not saying that our lives can’t be full of hardships and challenges, and that sometimes it’s hard to understand why God’s giving or allowing certain things in our lives. I’m not saying that we have to pretend like the hardships don’t exist and that we should just be happy all the time. No, Scripture affirms that life is hard, that we will be “grieved by various trials” (1 Pet. 1:6).

But what Jesus is teaching is that our God is equally compassionate and generous with all of us, and provides for us everything we need. And remembering that *while* we go through the hardships and challenges will help keep us focused on the place from where our true and eternal help comes: from His hands.

Many unfortunately have decided, after years of trying to anticipate something different from God, or after years of failing to look to His hands for everything they need, many have decided to turn away. That instead of receiving what God offers, they withdraw their hands, closing them to His gifts. And if this goes on for long enough, that closed hand can turn into a fist. A fist that shakes in desperation, or confusion, or even anger at God. Which ultimately can lead to a rejection of Him.

There was a time in history when this very thing happened, and God’s people rejected His greatest gift: His only Son, Jesus Christ, who was sent into our world as a human being, to live, to die, and to be raised for His people, for their sins, for their rejection. But the people of

Israel, the people who should have been accustomed to receiving all good things from God, didn't want to receive it. And they shook their fists, and called out to Pontius Pilate for a crucifixion. And they rejected Jesus like a common criminal.

But to their surprise, and ours as well, God used a different pair of hands that day. The hands of a Savior, one stretched left, one stretched right, with metal stakes driven through them. And those hands were a Godly gesture to every person in the world. A gesture that says, "I know that you rejected Me. But I chose you. And I forgive you all your sins. You don't deserve anything that comes from My hands. But I'm going to give it all to you anyway."

God is that unexpectedly generous master of the house. And He has given to every person a full share of the eternal life in His Son, Jesus Christ. He gives that to you and to me. Our ultimate hope is in His promise, that one day the hands that were *pierced* will be the hands that will *restore* all of creation to perfection. His redemption will be fulfilled. And it's *that* promise that sustains us in this life.

God has made us now the Body of Christ, the Church. Which brings us to our final set of hands: our hands, the hands of a servant. As Christians, we live our lives with one hand clinging tightly to our Savior's loving hand, and stretching out and serving with the other.

This is what we see Paul doing in our Epistle reading. He writes to the Philippians while he is imprisoned for the Gospel. His trial would decide whether he would live or die. And all the while, though his hands were physically in chains, they never stopped serving. Paul saw the suffering in his life for what it was: a time and an opportunity, given by the hands of God, to do the work of Jesus Christ. Even death would be a gain for him, because he had Jesus. And Paul was determined to tell everyone about his Savior, and he did. The whole imperial guard knew of the hope he had in Jesus.

Paul wrote with a mind set on the hands of God. He understood that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways. And yet, Paul lived fearlessly, because he knew that the hands of God are generous, and that, through the hands and work of Jesus, God has taken care of everything. Paul was fearless to serve others for the sake of the Gospel.

He writes to the Philippians, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents" (1:27-28).

We are charged with the same mission he gave the Philippians. To serve and love others, because we know we know those around us are equally undeserving, and yet equally recipients of God's grace. Perhaps that looks like sharing a word of comfort in our parking lot with someone who's come to our church for some food. Perhaps that means praying with your family to Jesus, when you aren't quite sure how you're going to get through the next few days. Perhaps that means, in a world that would stop at nothing to keep you silent, you give voice to your faith in the Father, who has wonderfully treated us all with an eternal grace, making us all equal, equally loved in His eyes.

With our eyes set on the gracious hands of our Father, we cling firmly to the hand and promise of our Savior Jesus, as we serve others with our hands in a manner worthy of the Gospel. Those are some pretty powerful hand gestures. In Jesus' name.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.