

St Thomas' Church
 Septuagesima
 February 9, 2020
 rmceely+

So the last will be first and the first last
 For many are called but few chosen

Septuagesima, Sexigesima, Quinquagesima

What the heck is a Gesima?
 what is it doing in my church?
 who spilled it all over the place?
 and how am I going to clean it up?

I hear you ask.

“Gesima” is a Latin derivative meaning “Days”.

The Septua, Sexi and Quinqua all refer to numbers:

70, 60 and 50 respectively

So Septuagesima, Sexigesima and Quinquagesima

All refer to the number of days left before Easter
 and today, Septuagesima, is to alert us that Easter is 70 days away
 And it is time for us to prepare.

This three week long Pre-Lenten season points us and prepares us

For the rigors of Lent

For the discipline of the fast

For the work to be done

For the drama of Passion Sunday

Palm Sunday

Holy Week

Maundy Thursday

Good Friday

And the celebration of the Resurrection... Easter itself

The colors have changed to the penitential color of violet

The liturgy has changed

The Gloria in Excelsis and the Alleluias have vanished.

If we are to take full advantage of the Season

Now is the time to consider

How you will observe the season this year

Will it be a dietary fast?

Will it be a study or reading or instruction?

Will it take the form of daily prayer? The daily offices?

Will it be a form of Christian Charity?

Is this the year you seek an oral confession to a priest

To take care of that nagging concern

That somehow will just not fade away?

All of the Epistles in this Pre-Lenten Season come from Paul's
Epistles to the Corinthians

Lessons about living a Christian Life

About Faith Hope and Charity

About Paul's torment

About what it takes to seek after the Christ

The Gospels are two of Jesus' most famous parables

The workers in the vineyard that we have today

And the sower of the seed next week

And finally Jesus telling the Apostles of what is about to take place

The Church exhorts us to immerse ourselves in all that Lent presents

And it is so important that we have a three week heads up

To get ready for it.

With that introduction

Let's dig into the message for this week

St Paul's famous Epistle, analogizes our Lenten discipline to a foot race
and a boxing match

To run, that we may obtain the prize

To give our all,

To train for it,

Prepare for it

Strive for it

To obtain not the laurel wreath that will wither

 But the incorruptible crown: The unceasing love of God

The Epistle is well timed and placed

Good advise to lead us to the rigors of Lent.

We'll come back to it.

But, please let's turn to the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Jesus and the Apostles are gathered on the shores of the Sea of Galilee

Peter has asked Jesus an awkward but, oh so human a question

“Jesus, What's in it for us?

We have given up everything

What do we get in heaven?

In order to explain the divine

In terms that mortals might comprehend

Jesus then gives them a series of 4 parables.

Jesus begins: “the kingdom of heaven is like unto’

And gives them the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

He does not directly answer the question about Heaven

Instead, He gives them parables to occupy their minds.

There are some things that we need to know about this parable in order to
see with First Century Eyes:

The wage offered by the householder of the vineyard is not the wage of a vineyard worker of the day.

In the Greek it is a denarius. In English a penny.

In either language; it is the daily wage of a Roman Soldier

Much greater than what a day laborer of the time would be paid

The other thing is that some things never change.

The laborers are gathered in a place

where people,

seeking daily workers

come to hire them

Just as today we may go to Home Depot where men are gathered to be hired for the day. Employers in the parable come and select men to work for the day.

The householder hires the first group of men

At 6 am

promising them the elaborate wage

He returns throughout the day

But to these he promises to pay them “whatever is right”.

Then the story presents the first of its surprises:

The householder returns to the labor pool at 5 o'clock

With only an hour left in the work day.

What use could he have for men who could only work an hour?

And how surprising that there were still men there

so desperate for work

that they remained all day

hoping for a job,

even one that could last only an hour.

We reach the end of the work day

And the next surprise

The householder reverses the usual order of the paymaster

And calls forth the men who most recently arrived
 And pays them first
 Purposefully paying them while the others are waiting and observing
 The usual order would have avoided the entire controversy
 Upon payment to the first men,
 they would have gone
 and never learned that the last received the same wage
 but that would have ruined the story.
 And the point lost.

So the first workers complain.
 Was it that the last workers were paid too much
 Or that the first workers, who had already received more than the
 common scale, should be paid even more?

The parable is discomfoting for us when we view it with 21st Century eyes
 God violates the Federal Fair Labor Standards Act probably AB5 too.
 It strikes us as unfair
 Why should the men who only worked an hour receive the same wage as
 those who toiled the entire long hot day?

Remember, Jesus told us that this Parable is about the Kingdom of
 Heaven. So put away your worldly notions.
 The Parable is about Heaven,
 God's world,
 not ours of the here and now.

Think of:
 The Householder of Heaven as --- God.
 The vineyard of Heaven as God's --- Church
 The labor to be done as the work for --- the church
 Those who were first called to work in God's church as --- the
 Children of God; the Jews
 Those who were called later, as --- the Gentiles

The wages as --- God's grace
 Think of those things and the Parable begins to look differently all
 of a sudden.

God first called the Children of Israel
 to work in His Church
 and some responded to the call and worked;
 Planting His seed,
 watering,
 feeding
 and caring for the vines,
 pruning
 and weeding.

For these first called, there was an arrangement for their reward; a
 contract: one full day's work in return for a penny.

Much later, God called the Gentiles to His church
 and some responded
 and they served well.

But for these there was no arrangement. They were to receive
 "whatsoever was right."

At the end of the day it was time to pay the Laborers.
 He ordered the last,
 the Gentiles
 to the front of the line
 to be rewarded first.

They received an equal measure with the Children of Israel.

Lastly, God then fulfilled his promise to the Children of Israel.
 But they had become jealous that God bestowed the same blessing
 upon the Gentiles and complained that they deserved more or the
 Gentiles less.

The Good News is that God does not work on a contract with us,
 does not become indebted in a bargain.

There is no mathematical formula,
 no point system
 that we can manipulate,
 by which we can earn our salvation.

There is nothing we can do
by ourselves
 to be saved.

God's mercy is for the sake of His only begotten Son
 Not for the sake of our merits.

All who come to God with a right heart receive His grace;
 that gift from God that brings us closer to Him.

It does not matter to Him
 that you have been His all your life
 or whether,
 like the thief on the cross at Jesus' crucifixion,
 you become one with Him,
 shortly before death.

God explains all this to the complaining First laborers
 whom he had rewarded last.
 And then God dismisses them from the vineyard, >>>> take
 your penny and
 . . . Go.

The laborer who responded to the call later in the day,
 who had no defined arrangement for reward,
 who would accept God's promise of
 "whatsoever is right"
 on FAITH IN HIM,
 he is the man God chose to remain in the vineyard.
 To remain with Him in Heaven

The Parable reveals that it does not matter when in our lives we discover life's purpose – union with God.

The chosen are simply those who understand this truth in time --- before their death.

So with a new look at the Parable of the laborers,
and hopefully a better understanding of it,
perhaps it makes more sense.

We begin the Pre-Lenten season with the most comforting assurance

that it is never too late in our lives
to receive God's saving grace.

And our faith in God will make the difference in the New Covenant with Christ our Lord.

Note: the life of a Christian
Is not one of passive
Relaxation
And ease.

Rather, God demands of us all
Our strength
Energy
And devotion

We are called to be workers in God's vineyard

This uplifting Gospel message is tempered
on this First Sunday in Pre-Lent
by St Paul's Epistle and his apt analogy.

That we must constantly run the race that is our lives,
With the goal ever before us
to win.

Diligently prosecuting the will of God as He reveals it to us

Like Paul's athlete:

To be first
To train for the race
To hone our bodies
To fill our minds
To empty our souls

And having done all

Exhausted at the finish line
To win the prize of everlasting life
The eternal unceasing love of God

Because as Jesus tells us with this parable
if it is never too late to receive God's grace
it is also never too late
to leave the narrow pathway to God
and to be damned.

So the last will be first and the first last
For many are called but few chosen

