

Sermon – Matthew 20:1-16; Jonah 3:10—4:11

David R. Lyle

Grace Lutheran Church

17 Pentecost – Year A

20 September 2026

“Grace Over Grumbling”

Friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Having three children who play sports, people sometimes assume that they got their athletic talents from me. And they, of course, correct! I was, after all, named Defensive Most Valuable Player of my soccer team. In second grade. What can I say? I peaked early! Not only was I named Defensive MVP, but I have the trophy to prove it, somewhere in my dad’s basement. It is, sadly, one of only a few trophies I ever received, because back in my day you didn’t get trophies just for showing up. Trophies were for winners! Kids these days get trophies just for showing up. Participation trophies. Can you imagine?
2. I don’t think Jonah could have imagined. Or maybe he could have and just wouldn’t have liked it. I can almost hear him shouting at the kids as they walk past with their participation trophies, “Get off my lawn!” On the other hand, the prophet Jonah was not exactly a model of emotional maturity. You know the story. God desires the people of Nineveh to repent of their sin. So, God calls Jonah. The prophet, instead of travelling 500 miles east to Nineveh, hops a boat and tries to head to Tarshish, 2,000 miles in other direction. There’s a storm and a great big fish, in whose belly Jonah spends three days – foreshadowing! Why is Jonah so keen to avoid God’s call? Partly because of who the Ninevites are; they are sinful pagans and they are the enemies of Jonah’s people. But mostly because of who God is. Jonah knows that God is merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. And Jonah can’t stand

that about God. He knows that God is going to let the Ninevites off the hook and make room for them in God's mercy and grace. What kind of God does such a thing? Are there trophies for everyone? By the way, when you get home today, read the whole book of Jonah. It won't take long. Read it out loud. Use funny voices. This stuff is hilarious, and it gets at the absurd character of our God.

3. Of course, Nineveh was a one-time deal. Jesus, who would soon spend three days in the belly of death, came to enact God's ways writ large. So, another parable. A landowner needs help in the vineyard. He hires workers. He finds the go-getters ready to go at 6:00 a.m. But there is too much work, so he hires more at nine, then noon, then three. Finally, at 5:00, he finds some idlers who haven't found work yet. He needs them and brings them in. To everyone's surprise – and this happens for everyone to see – the latecomers receive the usual full day's wage. Excitement builds throughout the crowd. It looks like the landowner is now paying out a denarius per hour, not per day! But it is not to be. The 3:00 o'clock crew, then the folks from noon, the 9 o'clockers, and the all-day folks all open their pay envelopes to find the exact same thing, just as they were promised. It is, I confess, difficult not to empathize with them in their grumbling. They'd worked all day, bearing the full burden of the sun and the heat and the work itself. How dare the landowner do such a thing? A business, a world, run in such a way will soon fall apart! Why would anyone go to work on time the next day? What sort of way is this for a landowner to manage the land? What sort of way is this for God to run a world? Is there just going to be room for anyone, for everyone, now? Does Jesus think that God can just do whatever God wants? Oh. Wait.
4. While it is true that many of us have more in common with the all-day workers than the latecomers, it is also true that there was a time when we were outside looking in. And times we continue to feel that way. Where were you found? How did you come into the vineyard? Yesterday, I drove about

250 miles each way to that I could be at Waypost Camp. It was there, on the shores of Mission Lake in central Wisconsin, that I came to know the God who had first met me in the waters of the font. The first time I went there, I was a five-year old with a broken arm, a speech impediment, and lots of questions about my place in the world. I don't know if it's common for five-year olds to have existential crises, but that's where I was at. Throughout the years, my life would intersect Waypost at the most important, formative times, both as a camper and then as a counselor. Waypost was where I found my voice, my vocation, my life. It is the holiest ground on which I have ever stood. I made the trip yesterday because, after years of declining attendance and the resulting financial burden, the decision was made to close the site and focus on the other two camps the organization runs. So, a bunch of us gathered to worship and to say goodbye to the land and the lake, holy places where Jesus let us know we were welcomed and loved and never left behind. So much so that he gave his life to seal the deal. In a wonderful act, the vast majority of the camp is being donated to the Ho Chunk Nation, the indigenous people whose history in that place goes back much further than mine. It is sad and holy and wonderful. There was a time I was outside, a newcomer, unaware of God's goodness and grace. And then I found out. Why wouldn't I want the same for others? And why would I care who gets how much?

5. God, you see, doesn't keep records the way we do. And God doesn't deal in fractions. The laborers in the vineyard wanted to be paid per hour, but when God gives, God gives everything. When you come forward today to receive our Lord's body and blood, you won't get one twelfth, or one sixth, or half of what Jesus has to give you. You get everything, for you, for that is who our God is and how our God works. God isn't interested in your bookkeeping. Heck, the books have been cooked by the grace of the cross. Your sins are forgiven. Your old ways are dead, but you are alive. Why keep anyone out, or jostle for position? Don't count the hours. Be grateful for the time. Because God's work is worth doing, and there are people in this world who still need

to hear. To hear that God loves them, too. That the gifts of Jesus, of forgiveness and mercy and life and grace, are for them, too. Just as they are for you. How might your vision change if you kept this parable in front of you, reminding us all that God's makes space for everyone? Christ, who was dead, is alive, and the old ways are over. First or last, who cares? The good news is that we're in, standing together on the holy ground of the gospel. Enough with grumbling when gratitude will do. Thanks be to God that God is not like us, and that God will insist on doing what God desires to do, going out over and over again until all who were lost are now found. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.