

## Order of Worship for September 24, 2023

P: The Lord be with you.

**C: And also with you.**

**Opening Hymn:** *“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”* - **Hymn #802**

**Confession and Forgiveness:**

P: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**C: Amen.**

**Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 55:6–9**

R: “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

R: This is the Word of the Lord.

**C: Thanks be to God.**

P: “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.”

**C: Lord God, can we find You? Are You near?**

P: “Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD.”

**C: How can we return to You, when so much seems so unfair and unjust to us? Are we doomed with the wicked?**

P: “God has compassion on us, He will abundantly pardon.”

**C: You will? Even when we deserve only death?**

P: As we confess our sins to our God, He freely forgives us for the sake of our Savior Christ Jesus. By the command of Jesus I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**C: Amen.**

P: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD.”

**C: We praise You that Your thoughts are way beyond ours, that You do not limit Yourself to our selfish ideas of justice, but treat us**

P: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

**C: We thank You, LORD, that our ways, our sense of right and wrong, is not Yours, for being far more merciful that we can imagine, for forgiving us not because it makes sense, but because of You overwhelming love.**

**Service of the Word:**

**Entrance Psalm:**

P: I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving

**C: and call on the name of the LORD.**

P: What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits to me?

**C: I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD,**

P: Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.

**C: O Lord, I am Your servant; You have loosed my bonds.**

**ALL: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

P: I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving

**C: and call on the name of the LORD.**

**Prayer for the Day:**

P: Let us pray.

Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**C: Amen.**

**Choir Anthem: “Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled” – arr. Bob Burroughs****Epistle Lesson: Philippians 1:12–14, 19–30**

R: I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. 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. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

R: This is the Word of the Lord.

**C: Thanks be to God.**

P: God, it is no fair. Why do some people seem to get all the breaks,

**C: but most lose out?**

P: Why do so many evil men run nations

**C: and do cruel things to their people?**

P; Why do the corrupt continue to get rich,

**C: while honest, hard-working people have to pay off the debts?**

P: Why do people who care for their health get sick?

**C: while those who abuse their bodies with addictions live on?**

P: Why do older people who pray each day for You to let them die and enter into rest with You live on'

**C: while young children gain terminal diseases?**

**ALL: It is no fair!**

### **Holy Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16**

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew the 20th chapter.

**C: Glory to You, O Lord.**

(Jesus said) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. 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 who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last."

P: This is the Gospel of the Lord.

**C: Praise to You, O Christ.**

### **Sermon Hymn: "Hark the Voice of Jesus Calling" – Hymn #827**

### **Sermon: "Unfair God" – Matthew 20:1-16**

We live in an unfair world. And it's always unfair against us. Every week, we can point to at least one missed call that went against the Cyclones that might have changed the course of the football game. Last week, it was the fact that a field goal call cannot be reviewed if it goes above the uprights. This week, who knows? But there will be one, maybe even one bad enough to add to the apology letters Athletic Director Jamie Pollard has up in his office.

We don't only see how unfair the world is in sports. Last Friday, the United Auto Workers went on strike, for the first time striking against all three major auto makers in the US at the same time. They claim they gave up pay and pensions to help the auto makers survive the recession 14 years ago, and now is the time to make it up. Strikes in Hollywood continue with no end in sight, as writers and directors claim they are being compensated unfairly in this new age of streaming, while the studios claim it's unfair when there isn't as much money in streaming as everyone thinks there is.

But the world is unfair, and it's always unfair against us. That's true today, and it was true 2000 years ago as Jesus told a parable about workers in a vineyard who were treated unfairly.

Jesus tells this parable in response to Peter's earlier boast in chapter 19: "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matthew 19:27). In other words, "Look! The twelve of us gave up everything to follow you: our families, our jobs, our friends. Now tell us what we are going to get out of it! What will be our reward?" To which Jesus replied:

"Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:28-30).

Jesus promises the apostles that yes, they will receive honor and glory in the coming kingdom. Indeed, everyone who sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom of God will receive a reward: eternal life (19:29). But lest we only follow and serve Jesus for the sake of the reward, he adds the caveat that "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30). In other words, in the coming kingdom, we will be surprised by who gets in and what they receive once they're in.

And so Jesus tells us the parable of the workers of the vineyard to show that God is generous and unexpected. Jesus tells us this parable to prove that the world is not arranged the way we might like. We believe that "you get what you pay for" and "pay for what you do", you "get out of it what you put into it," and all the like. "The early bird gets the worm." And "God helps those who help themselves." But that's not grace, and that's not how God works. God doesn't help those who help themselves; God helps those who cannot help themselves, because God isn't fair; he is merciful.

Instead of an absentee landowner we get in some parables, Jesus here tells of a hands-on landowner, who needs workers to work in his vineyard. He keeps going back and back to the town square where the workers are hanging out waiting for a job. He promises to pay the first group a denarii, a day's wage, and then promises to pay the rest of the workers fairly.

The problem arises when he decides to pay the workers, beginning with the last ones hired, and pays them each a denarii. Those who were hired earlier and worked longer begin to think that they will get a bonus. When they receive the same pay, the pay they were promised when they were hired, they get upset.

God isn't fair. And that's a good thing. We don't get what we deserve, and we get what we don't deserve. We don't get the punishment our sins deserve. Instead, we get forgiveness and life and salvation. Not because we've earned it, but because Christ earned it for us. People regularly understand and appreciate God's strange calculus of grace for themselves, but fear and resent it being applied to others.

Instead, God gives us what we don't deserve. As Isaiah tells us, our thoughts and our ways are not the thoughts and ways of God. And the fact that God doesn't think like us is a really good thing.

Instead of giving us what we deserve, God gave Jesus what we deserved. And what Jesus earned for us, for perfectly keeping God's commands throughout his earthly life, for working in God's vineyard since time began, is what we get. It is not what we deserve, but it is pure grace.

Isaiah tells us to seek the Lord while He may be found. But with the workers in the vineyard, it was the vineyard owner who was seeking us. He is the one who kept coming back, looking for more workers. And it was he who hired the workers no one else would. The ones with the black marks on their resumes, who didn't quite dress the right way or clean up as well as others. The ones who for whatever reason were still waiting at the end of the day.

That's the way God continues to work, as well. God doesn't just stop content with those who've been called to faith and come to work in his vineyard. No, God keeps going out to call people.

Career fairs were held at Iowa State this week. Students dressed up, printed off resumes, and practiced their elevator pitches so they could talk to companies and hopefully find an internship or a job. They tried to put their best foot forward, give the best first impression, to earn a chance at a better life.

How blessed we are that God doesn't work that way! We don't need to dress up in a suit or tie, because God sees us clothed with Christ. We don't need to prepare our own resumes because they would fall too short. Instead, we present Jesus' resume as our own. We don't need a good elevator pitch for God to hire us. Instead, God equips those he calls to do that tasks he has prepared for them to do. We don't need to worry about giving God a good first impression, because he sees us as we are, and loves us anyway.

God isn't fair, but that's a good thing. God is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God calls people of all abilities at all times and in all places to work in his vineyard, and the reward is the same. Be glad you don't get what you deserve. Instead, rejoice God gives graciously and abundantly. God's not fair, but God is good.

**Creed: 4<sup>th</sup> Petition of the Lord's Prayer and Explanation:**

**Responses on God's Mercy:**

P: "Assyria will not save us, we will not ride on horses; nor will we say again, 'Our god,' to the work of our hands; for in You the orphan finds mercy." (Hosea 14:3)

C: "**For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.**" (Deuteronomy 4:31)

P: "Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us."  
(Luke 1:78)

**C: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us.**  
(Ephesians 2:4)

P: "God saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:5)

**C: "For God says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on who I will have mercy on and compassion on who I will have compassion.'" (Romans 9:15)**

P: "And God's mercy is upon every generation toward those who fear Him." (Luke 1:50)

**C: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1Peter 1:3)**

P: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16).

**C: "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." (James 2:13).**

P: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:13)

**C: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." (Matthew 5:7)**

**ALL: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:36)**

**Prayers:**

**The Lord's Prayer:**

**Hymn: "When Aimless Violence Takes Those We Love" - Hymn #764**

**Children's Message:**

**Closing Prayer:**

P: O Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, You have safely brought us to the beginning of another day. Defend us in the same way with Your mighty power and grant that this day we fall into no sin, nor run into any danger; but in all our doings, being ordered by Your governance, may be righteous in Your sight, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and rules with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**C: Amen.**

**Blessing: (Pastor)**

**C: Amen.**

**Closing Hymn: "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" - Hymn #765**