

Order of Worship for September 20, 2026

P: The Lord be with you.

C: And also with you.

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

Confession and Absolution p. 203

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.

Kyrie (Lord, Have Mercy) p. 204

Hymn of Praise: Gloria in Excelsis p. 204

P: The Lord be with you.

C: And also with you.

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.

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.

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.

Alleluia and Verse p. 205

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**

One of the things that we as Americans hold dear is the idea of equality. One of the most quoted phrases from the Declaration of Independence is "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Accordingly, we insist on such noble ideas as equal rights and equal opportunity. We also insist on equal pay. Notice how many laws have been passed to ensure equal pay for equal work. The Equal Pay Act (EPA; 1963) prohibits sex-based wage discrimination. Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts (1964) expands the EPA by prohibiting compensation discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (1967) protects workers aged forty and older from being paid less than younger workers or being let go for their age. Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) prohibits discrimination against people with physical or mental disabilities. Repeatedly, the United States Congress has acted to codify equal pay for equal work.

Make no mistake, these laws are wonderful gifts. Because of our collective sinful inclinations, society runs much better when laws like these keep us in check, serving as a curb, following the first use of the Law. But we should be aware of what they condition us to expect from God. We expect God to be at least as fair our society. But that is not how God operates.

As Jesus tells this parable to his disciples, we need to look back and see again why Jesus is telling this parable. Immediately preceding this parable is the account of the rich young man who comes to see Jesus. He asks what he must do to have eternal life, and claims to have kept all of the commandments. Then Jesus tells him that he must sell all that he has, give to the poor, and then he can come back and follow Jesus. But the young man leaves grieving, because he had many possessions.

The disciples then start asking Jesus again about what they will get. They've given up their possessions and followed Jesus. They left their fishing boats and tax booths, family and friends. What do they get?

Jesus promises the disciples 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.

The Kingdom of Heaven, as Jesus describes it in His parable, does not run by an economy of equal pay for equal work. It runs by the economy of God’s generosity. As the master tells the greedy workers who were hired first (20:15): “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

To those who have nothing to offer, who have not even earned an hour’s worth of wages, God freely gives forgiveness, life, salvation, resurrection, and eternity, which is why it might be helpful to extend this week’s reading by a few verses. Immediately following this parable, Jesus announces (for a third time!) the unconventional and otherworldly generosity of God. Once again, Jesus reminds His disciples that He would suffer, die, and rise on the third day. In other words, He tells them once more that He will lose His life before finding it again on the third day.

So, it is with us too. Those who find life in Christ, who have been generously sought and found and united to Jesus in His death and resurrection also lose. They lose their ego. They lose their scorecard. And according to today’s parable, they lose their deeply ingrained cultural sense of fairness and equality.

Like many good things, fairness and equality can be twisted by sin and become vices instead of virtue. Comparing yourself to someone else, like the workers in the vineyard did to each other, can lead to envy, and can be complex, dangerous and ultimately destructive. Smart people like Teddy Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States, remind us that “comparison is the thief of joy.” Humorist Mark Twain said even more strongly that “comparison is the death of joy.”

Examples abound in fact and fiction. Think of Mozart and Antonio Salieri, Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, where everyone is equal, but some are more equal than others. And, as with any human condition or emotion, the comparison complex is found in the Bible — just look at Cain and Abel, the first sibling rivalry, but definitely not the last.

Envy is not jealousy. Jealousy is a kind of protective impulse. One is jealous if a lover seems inappropriately attentive to another. You might be jealous to guard your reputation against attack or jealous in defense of familial honor. God is even described as a jealous God, not wanting to share worship with anyone or anything else.

Envy is resentment, a passionate spite that can become cancerous hostility. Joseph Epstein called envy “a self-poisoning of the mind, envy is usually less about what one lacks than about what other people have.” Envy grows from rivalry — when we are unable to see our own gifts without comparing them to the gifts of others. Capitalism thrives on envy. Envy drives marketing and advertising, is the emotional engine of influencer culture. Envy wants us to see what others have, see what we lack, and focus on what we don’t have instead of rejoicing with our neighbor and their success.

Dorothy Sayers wrote, “Envy is the great leveler: if it cannot level things up, it will level them down. . . At its best, Envy is a climber and a snob; at its worst it is a destroyer — rather than have anyone happier than itself, it will see us all miserable together.” Envy isn’t just a personal sin. It is one of shared consequences, a communal deadly sin.

That’s how Jesus points the disciples, and us, to look in the mirror and see our own envy. So, the last will be first, and the first will be last. Envy drives us to elevate ourselves over others by either beating them at the game or beating others down. But the question in this parable — Are you envious because I am generous? — calls us to remember that we are all recipients of a wild, prodigal, unexpected generosity. Manna that falls like rain; streams in the desert; lilies of the field — the gifts of God for all the people of God.

Envy inhibits gratitude. However, the reverse is also true: gratitude is an antidote to envy. Are you envious because I am generous? Don’t you understand? Gifts call forth thanks. Bask in gratitude for the generosity of the vineyard. Have an attitude of gratitude. There is no need for first and last. All are welcome, all provided for. Here is the garden without rivalry, without death. Here is abundant life.

Flannery O’Connor is a famous Southern American Catholic writer whose stories often use shock to drive home her point. In one of her most famous short stories, *Revelation*, the main character has been comparing herself to everyone else she meets in the story, and always putting herself above everyone else. The story ends as she has a vision.

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of blacks in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right ... They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that that even their virtues were being burned away...what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward in the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

We want things to be fair and equal. Thanks be to God that we are all equal in God's eyes. We're all sinners in need of a savior. We're all sinners in the hands, not of an angry God, but of a generous God. A God who gives to us not out of what we've earned, but out of what Jesus has earned for us.

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 those 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: 4th Petition of the Lord's Prayer and Explanation:

Prayer of the Church

P: Lord in Your mercy,

C: hear our prayer.

Sharing Our Ministry

Offering and Voluntary

Service of the Sacrament

Preface and Sanctus (*Holy, Holy, Holy*) p. 208

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Lord's Prayer p. 209

The Words of Our Lord, Pax Domini (*Peace of the Lord*) p. 209

Agnus Dei (*Lamb of God*) p. 210

Distribution of Holy Communion:

Choir Anthem (8:30): "Then Sings My Soul" – arr. Mary McDonald

“Here, O My Lord, I See Thee Face to Face” - Hymn #631

“Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go” - Hymn #854

Nunc Dimittis: *(Now let us depart)* p. 211

Prayer After Communion: p. 212

Benedicamus and Benediction: p. 212

Closing Hymn: *“Savior, Again to Thy Dear Name We Raise” - Hymn #917*

Postlude