

First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Sermon by Pastor Joan L. Beck  
Text(s): Mt 20:1-16

Sept. 20, 2020  
A/Lect 25  
My husband

***Prayer:** Let me love your generosity, to me and to everyone, whether I am last or first, trusting you.*

**My husband is a responsible Israelite.** Always has been.

**He was, after all, an oldest child—an elder brother** in a land and a time where to be an elder brother meant to know from the beginning that the family's property, name, inheritance, responsibility would rest on his shoulders.

**He learned as a boy to work in the fields,** to plant and to cultivate, to harvest and to store. I know, because my family lived on the next farm.

**I saw him always alongside his father,** learning not only the agricultural lessons, but the managerial parts. He watched his dad make decisions, judge character, hire permanent staff and, when necessary, fire them.

**Their family, like ours, also used temporary workers** for the peak planting and harvest seasons. Migrant workers, you call them. Day laborers, chosen from among the crowds of the poor, the peasants, the ones who didn't own land. They crowded the marketplace very day hoping for a day's work, a day's wage, to keep food on the table.

**It was a huge change for us, and a bitter one,** when not too many years after our marriage my husband became one of those day laborers rather than one of the employers. He lost his land, the land he had inherited from his father. It's a long story. He was on the wrong side, politically—the side that opposed the Romans—and he lost. Our land was taken. I don't need to go into the details.

**But even so, he didn't shirk his responsibility.** When life, or fate, or the divine One himself—blessed be he—rolled the dice this way, my husband learned to accept it. He would never leave me and the children destitute or even uncertain.

**He got up early every day and took his place in the marketplace** and looked for work from those who came seeking extra hands for their enterprises.

**The best times were when the jobs lasted for a season.** He would show what he knew and was recognized for his skill, trusted, consulted, sometimes even set in charge. Then we could buy some extra grain and set it aside. Sometimes we could manage a goat, with milk for the children and eventually meat for the family. There even might be enough for presents for the children on a festival day.

**But there were also the worse times,** when money was scarce, jobs tight, unemployment high. At times like that, sometimes he found work, but sometimes

not. Even then, my husband refused to give up hope, to give up pride. He would work out, to keep in shape for the days when work would come again.

**Every day except the sabbath he would go to the market square before dawn.** Dawn was when those with the most urgent work would come to hire their crews. He told me he always stood in front of the crowds, showing his strength. He wanted to draw attention to himself. He wanted work—and he deserved to get it, because he was willing to give himself over to the work if the work was given to him. A full day's work for a full day's wage.

**In those days, before inflation, a denarius was the customary amount.** A family could live on it if a man brought in a denarius a day, if they weren't careless. Which, do I need to point it out, I made sure that we never were careless with our money!

**At any rate, my husband always gave the employers what they were paying for: hard, honest work.** No overlong breaks in the heat of the day. No time wasted flirting with the maids. (He'd better not, if I have anything to say about it!) No slacking off several hours before the end of the working day at sunset.

**But then there was once the strangest day--and the strangest employer--he ever had.**

He was so full of the story of it when he came home that I felt as though I could have been there myself. It was a day that still confounds us when we remember it. It's why I am appearing before you this morning. How to understand that day, what to make of it. I hardly know whether such a strange experience made my life better or worse. Somehow, it made it deeper.

**Well. It was a day that was ordinary enough to start with.** It was during a fall that had hot, clear days late into the season. The grape harvest was on, an unusually heavy year. And when the grapes are ripe, it's all at the same time, there's no delaying. The farmers feared the weather might change any day, so they were in a hurry to hire large crews to pick-pick-pick.

**So my husband was pretty confident that he'd get work when he went out before dawn to the marketplace.** That's when the first employers, or their foremen or we called them stewards, began to arrive.

**I don't know what possessed him, but my husband signed on** with a man he hadn't worked for before. He told me he didn't even really recognize the man, hadn't even heard of him in gossip with the other laborers. But he was well-dressed and full of authority. He contracted my husband and several others for a full day's work at a full day's wage. It was to be a denarius for each of them. Quite satisfactory in those years. And so they began.

**Let me tell you, the day was a scorcher as soon as the sun rose very much higher.** I'm sure some of the men pulled up their hoods, letting the material shade them. Others probably stripped nearly to nothing, preferring the coolness, such as it was, of sweat evaporating. The large harvest was ready. Actually, they were in over their heads.

**It became obvious that a few more hands wouldn't hurt**, and so a couple of hours later the boss went back to town and brought back several more hands. Then more and more and more and more and more, all day long. Some of those guys toward the end of the day were pretty rough—some who'd already finished one job that day and now hoped to get another, but mostly the winos and the weaklings nobody else would take early. The last crew arrived in the late afternoon.

**That day was a scorcher, my husband said**, but there was something sweet about the way they worked together. Like a fine-tuned machine. Like a team.

**Until they quit for the day, anyhow.** Then, while they were still passing around buckets of water and towels, taking drinks and rinsing off and mopping up, the steward came with their pay. The big boss was not far behind. The boss gave a pretty little speech thanking the men for their work and saying the steward would pay them all, beginning with those who came last, and so they should line up now.

**So they lined up.** The steward walked down the line, placing silver in the hands of the first in line, the ones hired last. Those guys, the last hired, started looking at each other and talking. One guy bolted away really fast. It turned out the steward had given them each a denarius, a full day's wage for a couple hours of work, and if it was a mistake, the guy didn't want to hear about it. He just wanted to get out of there before they asked for their money back!

**But the steward kept on going down the line, giving each and every one a denarius.** He shook his head when some honest fool tried to hand the money back to him, asking if there hadn't been some mistake, did he think they were the ones who'd worked all day, hadn't he said to line up with the part-timers first?

**My husband couldn't believe his eyes or his ears.** It was turning into chaos around there. And all the while, that boss just stood there, a goofy smile on his face. Who'd he think he was? A bloody social worker? A king? Some kind of god?

**The steward pressed a coin into my husband's hand.** As he saw that it, too, was a denarius, he said he felt a hot flare in his brain, his gut, and across his vision. He says he almost threw the coin onto the ground, or into their faces, he was so furious. If it weren't for his lifelong habit of saving money, of keeping even the smallest pennies from the good days against the bad days that were sure to come again, he would have. How dare they cheat him that way?

**Excuse me, excuse me, you are probably now saying.** A contract is a contract. He agreed to a denarius. But what was he supposed to expect?! It's not fair if everyone is treated equally! There ought to be some way of giving people what's coming to them--! That's how he was ranting when he got home and told me all about it.

**But I told him, think about their kids.** They have kids, too, and elders in their households; that's why some were working two jobs, and even the winos and the weaklings, they have family. They need a denarius a day just as much as we do.

**“But don’t you think I deserved more?” he said to me.** “Why should I worry about them? Am I my brother’s keeper? I ask you,” he said to me.

**Soon after that he found a job as a steward, and life has been easier for us since then.**

**But just a few months ago something happened.** It was unrelated to this story I’ve been telling you, but somehow inside me it connects and has changed my thinking about it.

**There was this man,** a kind of a popular charismatic leader I think you might call him. Some people are saying a prophet. He was a carpenter from up north in Galilee, they say, before he took to the road as a teacher and preacher. They say he healed people, too, and freed them from evil spirits. Anyway, everybody was talking about this guy for some time. I understand they still do.

**The essence of this man’s message seemed to be** that there was no reason why people shouldn’t start living here and now the way that the visionaries and dreamers had always envisioned it was going to be in the world to come. That now is the time to forget our suspicions and our jealousies and our worries and our hatreds. Now is the time to turn to God for help and direction. Now is the time to make peace with all people, and share our bread, and make our systems just. Now is the time.

**This man said that that better day was not tomorrow or next year, but today, why? Because God is here and now,** as close as your hand or your heartbeat or the neighbor on your street.

**When I heard that, I couldn’t help it, I thought of that day my husband had worked in the vineyard in the scorching heat—he said he felt like a team** with everyone the boss had gathered from the marketplace, from the highways and byways, and told them all to come in.

**And I realized,** that if we keep insisting that our way is the only right way, and if we keep defending only our tribe, and if we keep insisting that we deserve better and even the best-- then we are going to miss out on it--the new world that is already happening all around us, because God is already in it, as the body is in the bread and the blood is in the wine and as the Word is made flesh and dwells among us.

**Well, to make a long story short, this man from Galilee ended up dead.** Executed; crucified. Right here in Jerusalem. Many people called him politically dangerous and religiously extreme. Others—well, they’re still talking about him, as if he were still at large and free.

**So it’s making me think.** I’ve only got one life to live. So does my husband. So does everyone: We’ve each been given our one denarius to spend. Why, somehow, do we think that’s not enough?

**If only God IS here and now, as close as my hand, or your heartbeat, or the Spirit’s breath; as close as our neighbor.**