

Growing up in my home church, my dad served as a Confirmation Teacher. One time at the end of the year, he was reviewing with his students everything they'd learned about Lutheran theology. He posed the question to the class, "What is it that saves us? How are we justified?" The pastor's daughter was the first to answer: "By our good works!" The thing is, she was not alone in her thinking, by any means. Because a survey this year from the ELCA's department for research and evaluation asked Lutherans, "What must you do to be saved?" **And fifty percent responded "Do good works."*** Fifty percent of Lutherans believe that our good works make us OK with God; that our righteous deeds earn us God's mercy and forgiveness. As our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton put it, "At least half of us admit that, deep down, we believe it's still up to us." *

It's no wonder so many of us subscribe to this **self-justification**.

Self-justification is all around us: we live in a cause-effect, action-reward world. Most all parts of our lives are earnings-based, profit-centered, or assessment-oriented. Our 10 year olds take annual standardized tests. We undergo regular personnel evaluations at work. Our county's long work with health-care asks what coverage people merit based on income, and its recent conversations about race and monuments consider who or what is deserving of public memorialization, expression, and influence.

Looking at the images this week from Hurricane Harvey You were likely moved to compassion for all the people Who fled disaster and lost everything. But before the flood waters had even receded, We already had

reports about how much the damage would cost, And what the storm would do to oil prices and insurance rates. The flood wasn't even over, And we were already on to the calculus of calamity.

But today's parable pushes us to consider when things don't add up. When we read this parable in one sense, We see God as the generous landowner: freely doling out the same wage to everyone, no matter how long or how hard they worked. We see in God-the-Landowner's generosity the truths that grace is free; that you can't earn God's love or work for God's mercy; that in the Kingdom of God, the first can be last and the last can be first. That's one way to read this parable.

But in another sense, we can see this generous landowner as showy, as intentionally inciting envy, maybe even a little snippy when he replied, "Didn't you agree to work for the usual daily wage?" And it's not as if any of the workers received an eternal reward: they still have to keep showing up to work the next day and the next. The parable ends with jealousy and division, not with healing and reconciliation -- showing the limits of ultimate fairness. Whatever we see as its summation, this parable is "calculated to offend." **Oh, sure, we all want fairness and equity and grace, but I think if we're honest with ourselves, we want fairness and equity and grace *a little bit more* when it serves us. We get envious and angry like the first laborers, expecting extra credit for our good work and becoming envious and divided when we don't get it. *** Even we Lutherans expect self-justification: believing God should reward our good works with love and mercy and

entrance into the Kingdom of God. As Bishop Eaton puts it, “We either disbelieve [God’s grace] for joy or don’t want to give up control.”*

The Good News Is that the joy is real and the control has already been wrest from our hands. God has given us the law to convict us and point out for us, like it did Jonah, our self-righteousness. And God has given us the gospel to proclaim that we are indeed forgiven of our sins. God washes you in the font so you may know and receive eternal life, and at the table God places bread in your hands so you can re-member that you come with nothing and receive everything because of the death Christ suffered and resurrection Christ had for you.

For “we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace For Christ’s sake through faith.”

Believing this will change how we live. Consider those 5pm laborers: the joy, the inclusion, the renewed sense-of-self they must have felt Upon receiving those full-day wages. Would it cause them to come earlier the next day? To invite their friends into this great deal? To befriend the landowner and the other laborers? Does grace cause us to put aside “just-deserts” thinking? Does being saved by grace alone redefine how we approach race relations, healthcare, or disaster relief? Does justification by God and not by what we do Cause us to befriend, really befriend, God and our neighbor?

For we are all those 5pm laborers: It doesn't matter when we or anyone else shows up or what we or anyone else brings. It doesn't matter what we do or how hard we work. God saves us by grace through faith because of Jesus Christ. May that Good News change our lives.

AMEN.

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Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary texts from Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon series observing the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation
Topic: Justification
Jonah 3:10-4:11
Augsburg Confession, Article IV
Matthew 20:1-16

CITATIONS

* From Bishop Eaton's column in *Living Lutheran*, February 2, 2017, "It's not what we do."

<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2017/02/its-not-what-we-do/>

** Phrase taken from Center for Excellence in Preaching Sermon Starters:

http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-20a/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

*** From Bishop Eaton's column in *Living Lutheran*, July 28, 2017, "The laborers in the vineyard." <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2017/07/the-laborers-in-the-vineyard/>