



Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
20 September 2026

Ascension Lutheran Church  
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About 16 years ago, I stood in this pulpit as a youth director and preached on Confirmation Sunday. I don't remember the sermon. But I remember what this place means to me. At the time, I had no idea that I would eventually find my way into ordained ministry. And so it feels especially meaningful—and honestly, a little surreal—to stand here today.

When I was the youth director here, Ascension was a place where I was finding my way, as a youth director, a theologian, and as a new mom. This is a place where people trusted me to grow into the person and pastor I am.

Thank you for the gift you gave me – the many ways this community walked alongside me and my family, and for the ways you helped shape my faith and my vocation. Thank you for having me here today. It is a joy and honor to be back.

Let's pray: Good and gracious God, we offer thanks for the gift of your church, the body of Christ. May the grace you offer in the name of Jesus dwell among us this day and always. Help us trust that it is enough. Amen.

A few weeks ago, I found myself in a conversation with a colleague in which my inner toddler came out before I could stop her and in response to something he said, I whined, "*that's not fair!*" It was one of those moments in which I wanted credit for doing the work, following the rules, and waiting my turn – but someone who did half the work I did got the credit instead.

We learn the word *fair* pretty early in life. Kids are experts at noticing when *fairness* does **not** arrive: "Why does she get to do that?" or, "he got more than me!" And, honestly, we don't really outgrow these feelings. We tend to just get better at disguising them... except in my case, when I neglected to filter!

We want something to show for what we've done... *I've been here longer. I've worked harder. I've given, sacrificed, shown up... more... so I deserve more.* The world teaches us to keep score. That we must earn our success, and that whatever rung of the ladder we have climbed is probably, even still, not enough. We learn that we should have something to show for what we've done – a diploma, a trophy, a raise. And that's exactly where Jesus meets us in today's gospel.

A landowner goes out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He finds some workers and agrees to pay them the usual daily wage. The landowner goes back and hires more workers at 9:00am, again at noon; at 3:00pm; and finally, at 5:00 o'clock—when there's barely an hour left in the workday. So the landowner sends all these laborers into the vineyard.

At the end of the day, the landowner tells his manager to pay *all the workers*.

The manager pays the people who arrived last... **first**. He gives those who worked **one hour** a full day's wage. Then he goes on to pay those who started at 3pm, at noon, and at 9:00am each a full day's wage. Whether they worked an hour or had been laboring since sunrise. All get the same full day's pay.

The workers are understandably angry. If I had been working all day, I'd probably point out to the manager that I had worked harder and longer – and question why I got the same wage as the workers who showed up an hour ago. It simply *isn't fair*.

So here's the plot twist Jesus offers in this parable – this isn't actually a story about the vineyard or its workers. **It's a story about us.**

Just before Jesus tells this parable, he's talking about what it means to follow him, and Peter essentially

says to him, “*alright, Jesus, we’re all in. We left everything and followed you. So...what do we get in return?*”

I love that Peter boldly says this out loud, because we all want to know that our work counts for something. That our sacrifices earn us status, that we’ll be recognized for our effort.

Don’t get me wrong, our work and our faithfulness all matter. But Jesus wants to make sure we understand **why** we sacrifice and serve. It is not to earn a place in God’s kingdom or to keep score of how much of God’s love we earn.

We serve God because God already calls us beloved, and our response to such boundless love is to turn outward, in love and service, toward our neighbor. And, that is a very different way than the world generally teaches us to live.

The best and worst part about grace is that it isn’t fair – at least not by the world’s standards:

- **Fairness says:** You get what you earn. **Grace says:** You receive what you could never earn.
- **Fairness says:** You worked an hour? You get an hour’s pay. **Grace says:** You need a day’s wage? Here it is.
- **Fairness says:** You messed up? Pay the price. **Grace says:** Come home. You’re forgiven.
- **Fairness says:** You weren’t here from the beginning? Get in line. **Grace says:** You’re here now. Come on in.

This is not to say there are no consequences to our actions. There are. But in every gift of grace that we receive, it comes with knowing that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. God loves **you**.

And that is where the gospel invites us to **imagine more**.

Young people in the ELCA will be hearing, “imagine more” a lot over this next year as they prepare for the Youth Gathering in Minneapolis next summer: it is rooted in Paul’s words in Ephesians: *God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine*.

That’s exactly what Jesus is showing us in this parable. The workers are thinking in terms of scarcity and fairness. They are thinking: *If **they** get more, I must get less. If they receive something they didn’t earn, then my work doesn’t matter*.

But God’s grace is not a pie. It is a pure gift.

The landowner operates out of abundance, trusting **there is enough**: of God’s grace and God’s love. And God invites us to imagine a world beyond our scorecards. What does it look like when we operate out of abundance, and trust there **is enough of God’s grace**?

I think it looks like allowing the person who showed up late to be freed from their striving to prove they are worthy and to rest in a community that embraces them all the same. I think it looks like when the table is already set and we’ve all begun to feast, pulling out a chair for the person who doesn’t look, act, think, or have power like those of us already at the table do – and to amplify their voice instead of our own.

It looks a lot like confessing when we have sinned and asking for forgiveness, even if it means the relationship is forever changed and there is no going back to what it once was.

I think grace feels like a full stomach when we thought we’d have to skip a meal. At our congregation, we have a Little Free Pantry, stocked with food to tide folks over if they’re food insecure. Recently, the pantry was fully stocked at the end of the day, and the next morning, completely empty. When someone pointed out **it needed refilling again...** I said, “*I guess they really needed it.*” Grace is God saying, *here... this is for you...simply because you are loved*. And so, instead of wondering whether someone had taken too much, I gave thanks that someone was a little less hungry that day.

God in Jesus Christ invites us to let go of our concern about whether we are getting as much as the person next to us. Because God's grace overflows beyond any line, border, or box we draw. There is enough **for you**. Maybe you've spent a lot of your life trying to demonstrate that you are enough... at work, in school, in relationships...

Jesus invites you to stop pushing your way to the front of the line to prove it. When we stop striving to earn our place, it can feel a lot like breathing again. Like not asking, "*what do I get?*" but instead asking, "*what can I give?*"

Because the kingdom of God is not a vineyard where we keep score of who worked the longest or who arrived first. It is a vineyard where the generosity of the landowner keeps surprising us with grace given, simply because of who God is.

Notice that the workers in this parable don't just receive their paycheck and go home. They become part of the work. That's what discipleship is. God's grace doesn't simply change how we feel, it changes what we do. When we know there is enough grace for us, then we can offer grace to somebody else. And it just keeps going.

That's the heart of what it means to **Imagine More**. Because God's power is already at work in us, God is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine.

So go back with me to the parable and those people standing in the marketplace at five o'clock. They've been hanging around all day. Nobody hired them. Maybe they wondered whether they had anything to offer or thought they were too late to get any work. And then the landowner arrives and says, "**come with me.**"

That's the invitation of Jesus. Come be part of what God is doing. Come use the gifts you've been given to serve and love your neighbor. Come and take the risk of imagining that God can do more through you than perhaps you can see right now.

Because you're not too late. You're not too ordinary, too broken, too young, or too old. There's a place for you. So maybe this week, when you catch yourself thinking, "*That's not fair,*" ask yourself: **Am I trying to prove that I am enough? Am I trying to decide who deserves God's grace?** And notice that God's grace meets you in the moment.

And then, try to **Imagine More**—more grace than seems possible. When you've known failure, brokenness, hurt, or shame; **and** when you've received the promotion, gotten the best seat, or found yourself at the front of the line—none of it changes that **God's grace is for you**. And when you're at the front of the line, know that it is not the spot Jesus says is the best. It is the place for the last, the least, and the late arrivals.

God can—and will—do far more in you and through you than you can ask or imagine. God sees **you**. **Calls you. Invites you** into the work of discipleship, of loving and serving, of giving and receiving, of living generously without keeping score.

So let's imagine more grace. Imagine more love. Imagine more of what God can do through you. Amen.